

ISSUE 112 FEBRUARY / MARCH 2016

UK £3.75 USA \$7.99 CANADA \$8.99

Philosophy Now

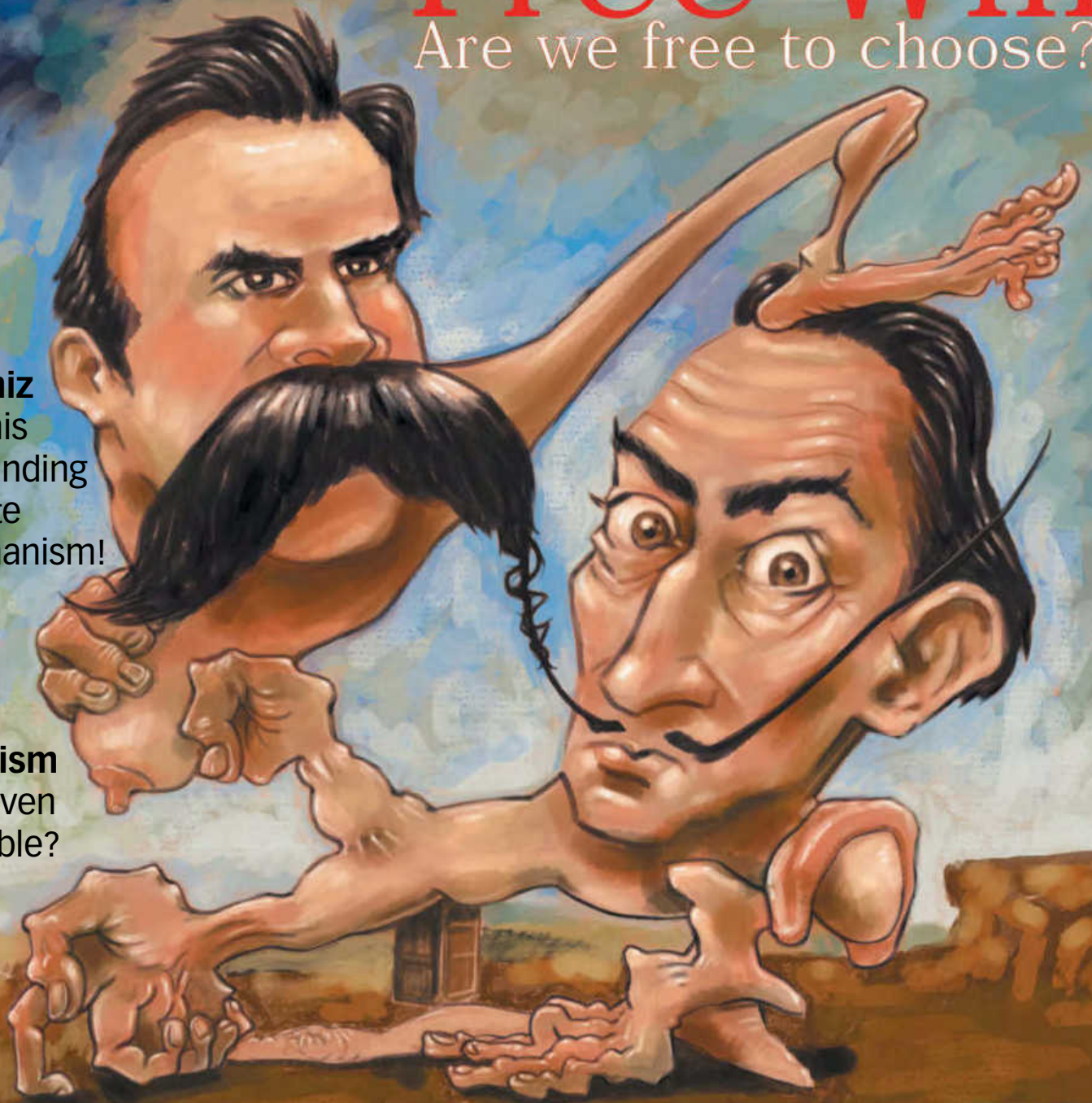
a magazine of ideas

Free Will

Are we free to choose?

Leibniz
and his
astounding
infinite
mechanism!

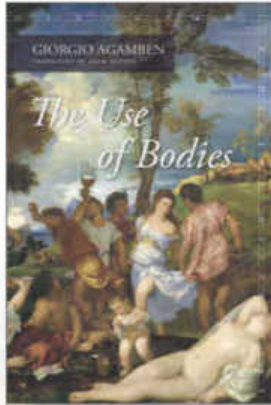
Altruism
Is it even
possible?



WHAT NIETZSCHE DID TO DALI

S. LILLIE 2015 AFTER DALI

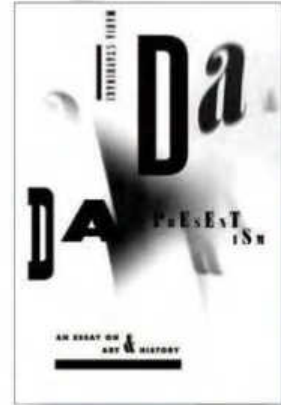
NEW FROM STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



THE USE OF BODIES
GIORGIO AGAMBEN
\$25.95 paper



HOW PICTURES COMPLETE US
The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Divine
PAUL CROWTHER
\$22.95 paper



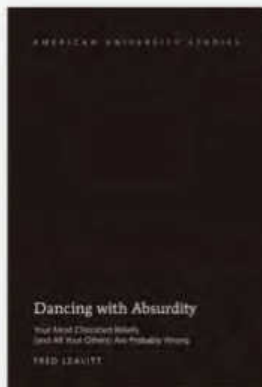
DADA PRESENTISM
An Essay on Art and History
MARIA STAVRINAKI
\$18.95 paper

Most Stanford titles are available as e-books:
www.sup.org/ebooks

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
800.621.2736 www.sup.org

Dancing with Absurdity

Your Most Cherished Beliefs
(and All Your Others) Are Probably Wrong



By Fred Leavitt
*American University Studies V:
Philosophy; vol. 219*

Hardcover; 220 pages
978-1-4331-2925-4 (print)
978-1-4539-1490-8 (ebook)

£ 52.00 - € 65.35 - SFR 79.00
US\$ 84.95

ALSO AVAILABLE THROUGH AMAZON AND MOST
MAJOR LIBRARY WHOLESALERS

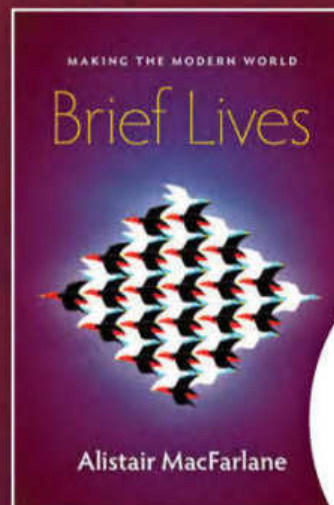
"Leavitt bulldozes various philosophical constructs, then merrily guides us through the wreckage — without ever condescending to the reader."
— *Glynn Washington, Host/Executive Producer of Snap Judgment (NPR)*

 Peter Lang Publishing
International Academic Publishers

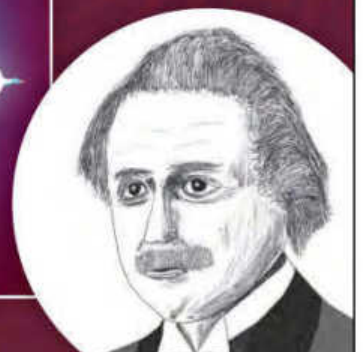
www.peterlang.com

THE MAKERS OF OUR MODERN WORLD

Who are the people behind the inventions, the discoveries, the tremendous scientific advances of the last millennium? How did they come to play such a key role in making our modern world? From Newton to Einstein, Russell to Wittgenstein, Ford to Jobs, this collection of pen portraits sheds light on the biography behind the science and the significant contribution of more than forty individuals who have changed our world.



This popular science book is widely available as a paperback and ebook on Amazon and other online retailers.



Philosophy Now,
43a Jerningham Road,
Telegraph Hill,
London SE14 5NQ
United Kingdom
Tel. 020 7639 7314
editors@philosophynow.org
philosophynow.org

Editor-in-Chief Rick Lewis
Editors Anja Steinbauer, Grant Bartley
Digital Editor Bora Dogan
Graphic Design Grant Bartley, Katy Baker, Anja Steinbauer
Book Reviews Editor Teresa Britton
Film Editor Thomas Wartenberg
Marketing Manager Sue Roberts
Administration Ewa Stacey, Katy Baker
Advertising Team
Jay Sanders, Ellen Stevens
jay.sanders@philosophynow.org
UK Editorial Board
Rick Lewis, Anja Steinbauer,
Bora Dogan, Grant Bartley
US Editorial Board
Dr Timothy J. Madigan (St John Fisher College), Prof. Charles Echelbarger, Prof. Raymond Pfeiffer, Prof. Massimo Pigliucci (CUNY - City College), Prof. Teresa Britton (Eastern Illinois Univ.)
Contributing Editors
Alexander Razin (Moscow State Univ.)
Laura Roberts (Univ. of Queensland)
David Boersema (Pacific University)
UK Editorial Advisors
Piers Benn, Constantine Sandis, Gordon Giles, Paul Gregory, John Heawood
US Editorial Advisors
Prof. Raymond Angelo Belliotti, Toni Vogel Carey, Prof. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Prof. Harvey Siegel
Cover Image © Steve Lillie 2016
Please visit www.stevellillie.biz

Printed by Graspco CZ, a.s.,
Pod Sternberkem 324, 76302 Zlin,
Czech Republic

UK newstrade distribution through:
Comag Specialist Division,
Tavistock Works, Tavistock Rd,
West Drayton, Middlesex UB7 7QX
Tel. 01895 433800

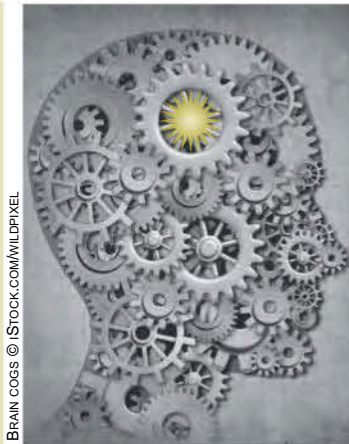
U.S. & Canadian bookstores through:
Disticor Magazine Distribution Services
695 Westney Road S., Unit 14,
Ajax, Ontario L1S 6M9
Tel. (905) 619 6565

Australian newstrade distribution:
Gordon & Gotch Pty
Level 2, 9 Rodborough Road
French's Forest, NSW 2086
Tel. 02 9972 8800

The opinions expressed in this magazine
do not necessarily reflect the views of
the editor or editorial board of
Philosophy Now.

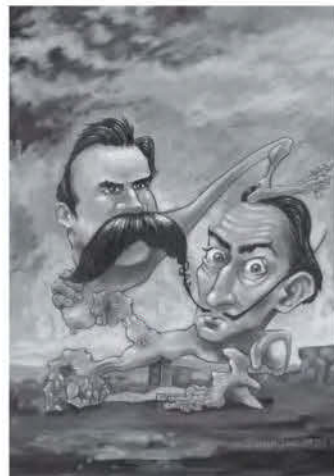
Philosophy Now is published by
Anja Publications Ltd
ISSN 0961-5970

Back Issues p.52
Subscriptions p.53



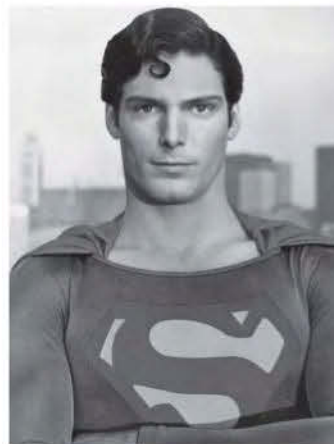
Free Will

Pages 6-17



Nietzsche & Dalí

Page 23



Altruism, or not?

Self-interest, p.30 Books, p.46

EDITORIAL, NEWS & INTERVIEWS

- 4 Feel Free to Disagree *Grant Bartley*
- 5 News in Brief
- 28 Interview: D.D. Raphael (1916-2015)
Gideon Calder chatted with the ethicist shortly before his death
- 38 Existential Comics
Corey Mohler records the battles of Jeremy Bentham

FREE WILL

- 6 Free Will Is An Illusion, But Freedom Isn't
Ching-Hung Woo explains the compatibilist account of choice
- 8 The New Argument About Freedom
Natasha Gilbert says it's not just about how determined we are
- 10 The Brain's Risk/Reward System Makes Our Decisions
Graham Boyd says it isn't up to us
- 13 Akrasia: Why Do We Act Against Our Better Judgement?
George Singleton worries why we do what we know is wrong
- 15 Reclaiming Freedom
Steve Taylor defends a common-sense idea of free will

OTHER ARTICLES

- 18 Leibniz and the Infinite Mechanism
Audrey Borowski tells us about Leibniz's biology
- 20 Herder and Human Identity
Brian King says to understand the herd, you need a Herder!
- 23 How Nietzsche Inspired Dalí
Magdalena Scholle on ideas and moustaches
- 26 Justifying Our Moral Judgments
Thomas Dabay derives a way of doing so from Hume & Kant
- 30 Why Self-Interest Makes Relationships Valuable
Daniel Tippens tells you how to be good to yourself through others

REVIEWS

- 44 Book: *The Most Good You Can Do* by Peter Singer
reviewed by Joel Marks
- 46 Book: *Does Altruism Exist?* by David Sloan Wilson
reviewed by William Irwin
- 48 Film: *Good Will Hunting*
Tamás Szabados existentially analyses a moving encounter

REGULARS

- 34 Philosophy Then: *Eastern Promises*
Peter Adamson looks at the ideas of ancient India
- 35 Brief Lives: *Colin Wilson*
Vaughan Rapatabana on the life of a unique mind
- 40 Letters to the Editor
- 50 Tallis in Wonderland: *"What A Possessive!"*
Raymond Tallis ponders a peculiarity of personhood

POETRY & FICTION

- 7 Free?
Peter Duff skewers the problem of free will in a single stanza
- 54 "... as it was determined to be so."
Short story by Kevin Heinrich



Feel Free To Differ

Welcome to our issue on free will. Did you *choose* to read this? I'm not asking out of mere politeness or astonishment; the question, *Is conscious choice real?* is right at the core of a tangle of philosophical problems around free will. If the answer is 'yes', you do choose, then your mind can decide what to think, and how you subsequently act, whether by speaking, or throwing a ball, or reading an editorial. That question is utterly different from the free will question that vexes theologians: Are we free if God already knows everything we'll do? It is entirely consistent to say that we do choose, but God knows what we're going to choose. That would mean we have free will in one core way – concerning choice – but not in another way – concerning, let's call it, our predictability. For this issue's theme we're interested specifically in issues surrounding the power of choice.

There are three main positions concerning choice: *libertarianism*, *determinism*, and *compatibilism*. Take your pick! *Libertarianism* is the belief that we make deliberated choices, which, through our brains, affect the material world, and that ultimately these choices are not absolutely determined by anything beyond the mind making them. *Determinism* is the belief that all our choices are determined by factors beyond our conscious control. The strong position says that through the brain's processing of responses to environmental information, one brain state automatically causes a subsequent brain state, and conscious experience itself has no influence on the physical activities of the brain or the rest of the body. *Compatibilism* is an attempt to combine determinism with moral responsibility (it therefore presupposes determinism). Versions vary, but the basic idea is that we simultaneously both are determined and somehow choose.

Determinism itself comes in different flavours. *Hard determinism* of the most absolute sort is the theory that the entire history of the universe was already fixed from its very beginning by the setting of the laws of nature and the original states of the matter in it. This is no longer tenable due to the intrinsic *indeterminacy* – the random behaviour – at the heart of matter that is explored in quantum physics. But physics does apparently allow a somewhat less absolute determinism – the idea that the behaviour of the world is determined by previous physical activities, but with some randomness as to what the *particular* outcomes will be. So a quantum determinist could defend an indeterministic determinism!

There are also *softer* determinisms. These say that we are *very heavily influenced* in our choices by factors beyond our control (and which we are often unaware of). One such soft determinism is genetic determinism, which says that who you become and what you do is inescapably influenced by your genetic make-up. In his article in this issue, psychologist Steve Taylor lists several types of soft determinism before attempting to refute them; and Graham Boyd explores one

splendid example in some detail in his intriguing essay.

There is no doubt that many of these softer versions of determinism are correct, to various degrees: the interesting debate concerns to what degrees, and so to what extent we can escape, for example, the chains of our DNA. Even the most ardent libertarian agrees that there are constraints on our freedom. What makes them libertarians is their insistence that the limitations don't deny some space for true, not physically determined, conscious choice between options.

I think there are two major problems for hard determinists (and so also for compatibilists) to address. Firstly, *How do you justify your assumption that causation is only physical, not also mental?* The idea that minds can't choose is so far only an assertion by determinists, *and* one that's not justified in experience (and so is not empirically sound), since all our experience of willing informs us that we do make choices, and that we do so effectively. So what sound basis exists for saying we don't choose?

The second problem is: *Why would consciousness evolve if it doesn't do anything?* On a more rigid determinism, our conscious states and our actions are the results of automatic brain activity; so our actions would be the same with just the brain activity and without the consciousness. However, consciousness is an expensive luxury, being created through specially-evolved, dedicated and energy-hungry brain areas (eg V4-V6 for colour vision). Consciousness is evidently not just a fortuitous free side-effect of other brain activity, as some determinists misrepresent it. So why evolve it?

I'm not convinced that determinists can answer either of these questions adequately. But there are major problems for the libertarian too. Choice is primarily about the mind's content: it's primarily the choice to think one thought – one set of mental contents – rather than another (this is true even when choosing to act). We now have irrefutable neurological reasons to believe that brains produce (or channel) consciousness. Therefore, if libertarianism is true (as I choose to believe), then *any choices made by a mind must also be a choice of the brain state underpinning the mind state chosen*. In other words, in choosing our mental contents, we must also choose the brain state responsible for the generation of those mental contents! So if there is free will, then there must be some way for a mind to direct the state of its brain, like a sort of local mind-over-matter. It's difficult to see how this could happen. (I personally think that the power of will operates through our choices being indirect observations of our brain states in a quantum manner. But that's a story for another time.)

Enjoy this investigation of this fundamental aspect of human existence. I think the question of choice boils down to the question, can we make decisions in our minds that influence the state of our brains? I suggest that we do not know precisely enough how consciousness is generated by brain activity to answer that question authoritatively, yet. *Grant Bartley*

- University scraps philosophy exams •
- Ethics teaching the Meiji way •
- Canadians consider euthanasia for children •



News

News reports by Anja Steinbauer.

Euthanasia for Children?

Passive euthanasia, withdrawing or withholding treatment with the effect of hastening a patient's death, has long been legal in Canada. Active euthanasia, taking positive measures to bring about a patient's death, will soon also be legal as per a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in February 2015. A new public debate has emerged in the wake of this step: Should the right to ask for one's own life to be terminated to be extended to children too?

It is not as strange a thought as it may seem: in the Netherlands euthanasia is lawful for patients over the age of 12, in Belgium for terminally ill children of any age if they are experiencing 'constant and unbearable suffering'. The consent of parents and doctors is, of course, needed. Dr Eduard Verhagen is a lawyer and the medical director at the department of paediatrics at the University Medical Center Groningen. He argues that "most children with a life-limiting illness, before they have even entered the terminal phase, have made decisions about their treatment, and about their lives 30, 40 or 50 times." A Canadian provincial-territorial advisory panel has now argued that access to doctor-assisted dying should not be hindered "by the imposition of arbitrary age limits."

Arthur Caplan, head of medical ethics at New York University's Langone Medical Center comments: "Setting the precedent that the state is going to tolerate killing children, even mature minors, is very, very dangerous... It's the slippery slope argument, and this is a slope I worry about. Sometimes I don't, but this one I do." There is also serious opposition from medical practitioners: "Most of our fight is about kids that want to live ... not most of our fight, all of our fight is about that, and how to do it with as minimal suffering as possible," says Dr Stephen Liben, director of the Montreal Children's Hospital pediatric palliative care programme. "The last thing I need as a palliative care physician for children is a euthanasia law."

Traditional Japanese Ethics Returns

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has taken steps to make traditional Japanese ethics a formal school subject from 2018. Japanese conservatives are on a quest to restore the values they say were rooted out during the US occupation after World War II. Part of an ongoing debate over national values and identity, the new teaching plans reflect their concern that Japanese people, especially the young, hold their own country and its history in low regard due to an over-emphasis in lessons on Japan's wartime aggressions.

The foundations of the new ethics syllabus will be the Imperial Rescript on Education signed by the Emperor Meiji in 1890. This document, once treated as sacred by Japanese schools, stresses the development of a range of social virtues including filial piety and loyalty to the state. The guidelines are now being worked into textbooks, ready to be used in new ethics classes taught in elementary and middle schools starting in 2018.

Nadine and Edgar

Meet Nadine, an emotionally intelligent robot employed as a receptionist at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. She has her own personality, talks and behaves like a human, and expresses emotions and change of moods as appropriate to topic and tone of the situation. She can recognise people she's met before and remember what was said during previous conversations. "This is somewhat like a real companion that is always with you and conscious of what is happening," Nadia Thalmann, a robotics professor NTU's School of Computer Engineering, argues in a press release. "So in future, these socially intelligent robots could be like C-3PO, the iconic golden droid from *Star Wars*, with knowledge of language and etiquette."

Now meet Edgar, a tele-presence robot constructed by the same team as Nadine at NTU. He can emulate the movements of his human user in real time. Using a

webcam, he can be controlled from anywhere in the world. He can interact with humans, sociably smiling and saying hello and read a programmed script. "Telepresence provides an additional dimension to mobility," says engineering professor Gerald Seet. "The user may project his or her physical presence at one or more locations simultaneously, meaning that geography is no longer an obstacle."

No More Exams!

In a radical move, the University of Essex is scrapping all philosophy exams: "In the advanced study of a subject like philosophy, we need to test students' ability to think in an original and creative way, rather than simply their power of recall", argues Professor Fabian Freyenhagen, head of the university's School of Philosophy in an article in *The Guardian* newspaper. Instead of cramming for exams, students will take extra modules in the summer term to pursue philosophical questions in greater depth. They will demonstrate their learning through assessed coursework; tests on unseen questions will still be used in a few contexts, such as assessing logic skills.

Philosophy Now Festival

We'd like to offer our deepest thanks to all the speakers, volunteers and members of the public who took part in the 3rd Philosophy Now Festival on 21 November 2015. There's a picture gallery in the 'photos' section of our Facebook page at: <https://facebook.com/philosophynow> and we are uploading videos to our YouTube channel.



Free Will Is An Illusion, But Freedom Isn't

Ching-Hung Woo says freedom is compatible with choices being determined.

We commonly think it obvious that a person facing multiple alternatives can choose any of them, and that the outcome is decided by free will at the moment of decision, rather than being already determined by earlier causes. All the events in the world, however, obey the law of physics, including those that happen inside a brain. If all events in the brain unfold according to classical physics, then free will in the above sense does not exist. This is because classical physics is deterministic: the state of the world at any moment is the inevitable consequence of its state at an earlier moment. Hence the alternatives are only *apparently* available to the decision-maker, as in fact only a single alternative is destined to be the one chosen.

In quantum physics the so-called probability amplitude evolves according to deterministic laws but the transformation

from many possible outcomes to one actual outcome takes place purely by chance. The statistical distribution for such chance events follows strict rules, but the outcome of an individual chance event is unpredictable and cannot be controlled by will. Thus any decision is either the predictable result of earlier causes (which may include quantum chance events) and is not free from determinism, or is itself a quantum chance event and is not willed. Either way, the free will we commonly take for granted is absent. What then is the freedom to choose that we so cherish and which politicians like to invoke at every opportunity?

Choice Under Determinism

In order to focus on the essential issues, let us put chance events aside, since, as we have seen, quantum randomness does not rescue free will. In this simplified context, let's try to see

whether our subjective feeling of freedom can be reconciled with physical determinism.

One thing we can't avoid noticing is that we have the experience of making choices. In fact, each choice consists of two stages. In stage one we conceive alternatives, and in stage two we are aware that we have picked one of them. Often the option picked is the one whose consequences we prefer over the consequences of its alternatives, but the comparison of consequences is not always done consciously. Furthermore, both genetic predispositions and past experiences play a role in forming an individual's preferences, so the causative factors leading to the making of a choice are complex. The conclusion is that although we do experience choice-making – that transition from stage one to stage two – this doesn't imply the absence of determining causative factors. We also have the impression that we could have chosen differently. But once a choice has been made, what sense is there to this idea? That is, although a decision-maker faced with the same set of alternatives again may make a different selection the second time, that would be because the overall situation, including the state of brain and mind, has changed. But once again, this choice is the result of previous causes. Hence the existence of free will in the sense of an autonomous force at the very moment of decision unconstrained by past causes, is not required to explain our actual experience of choosing. Our experience of choice-making is perfectly compatible with determinism if we accept that the transition from stage one to stage two – that is, from multiple possible options to the one actually chosen



Not What They Seem
by Danelle Hellen Gallo

GRAPHIC © DANIELLE HELLEN GALLO 2016 PLEASE VISIT WWW.ARTBYDANIELLE.WEEBLY.COM

– is, like any other kind of event in the world, the result of previous causes.

Once choice is properly understood in this way – as being causally, physically determined – we can proceed to consider the notion of free choice in wider ways. If a man holds a gun to my head and demands my wallet, and I choose to obey him rather than to try and fight, that's a 'coerced choice'. In contrast with this, we can say that a *free choice* is one that is not coerced. Ultimately, freedom in this sense depends on the absence of conflict between the choice-maker's nature, character, or core desires and the intended consequences of their actions. Since we are not averse to admitting that our nature is the result of our genetic predispositions and our past circumstances, this notion of freedom can readily coexist with the hidden operation of physical determinism, and also with the fuller scientific worldview where physical determinism is supplemented by quantum randomness.

Compatibilism & Moral Responsibility

Still, how can I be *responsible* for the consequences of such free choices, when the chains of events that cause them were determined outside myself, beginning long ago? The answer is hinted at in the word 'responsible'. The president of a nation may take responsibility for his administration's bad handling of relief work after a natural disaster, for example, even though he was not personally involved in any of the snafus occurring at the operational level. Analogously, although many aspects of my being pull me in different directions and argue with one another during the making of a difficult decision, there is a relatively stable center that I identify as my *self*, and this recognition means that I can take or own the responsibility for each decision that's made by me, even through or after the competition of all these factors. This is an appropriate expediency, since the detailed tracing of all the responsible factors is practically impossible.

The nature of the self is obviously complex. Some people have a narrow sense, and some an expansive sense, of the responsible self, and even the same person's self-perception may change over time. Or for example, a drug addict caught in a crime may claim "My habit made me do it!" In so saying he's treating his habit as if it's not a part of him. However, in pondering his responsibility, the jury ought to take into consideration



"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree..."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge became addicted to laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol) as a result of being prescribed it by his doctor for toothache. So was he *entirely* responsible for this poem written under its influence?

Free?

Are choices freely made just as it seems
Or do the atoms choose for us instead?
Do people just respond or intervene?
By choice illusions are we each misled?
If now I choose to work instead of play
Is that because that impulse is more strong?
Else what decides which impulse will hold sway?
Are we the movers or just moved along?
And when decidedly I am resolved
To take some course of action come what may
Was I observing or was I involved
In that decision in the proper way?
Despite the doubts, I must believe I'm free
Accepting that I am too near to see.

© PETER DUFF 2016

Peter Duff is a solicitor with a small practice in Blackrock, County Dublin. For more, visit his daily poem site at dailypoem.net/index.php/about-daily-poem/.

whether his habit was formed with his knowledge or without it (it might sometimes be a result of taking medicine his doctor prescribed). In other words, the jury should assign responsibility for the crime not just on the basis of whether the recent criminal act was itself a completely uncoerced choice, but also on whether some past free acts of the accused contributed to him being in a state where he committed the present crime.

In contrast to this addict, some people discover room for freedom – that is, for choices compatible with their nature – even when they're under strong coercion. When Henry David Thoreau was jailed for refusing to pay the poll tax, he felt he was still free because his mind could go anywhere, and, as he observed dryly, his mind constituted "all that was dangerous." And Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that Frenchmen were never freer than when France was under the Nazi occupation. How so? Well, the occupation created opportunities for defiance, and whether to risk defiance or not is a significant choice; hence Frenchmen were freer in the sense of possessing a richer menu of significant choices. The wiggle room allowed under coercion, however, is not always large enough for a choice to be meaningfully called 'free'. Sophie's choice, in William Styron's novel of that title, was to sacrifice one of her children or the other to the gas chamber. Reasonable people would regard the alternatives offered to her by the Nazi doctor as not much of a choice at all, and absolve Sophie of any responsibility for the death of the non-chosen child.

Adopting the absence of coercion instead of the absence of determinism as the essence of freedom gets us out of a conflict with the prevalent scientific worldview. Nonetheless, this notion still captures the importance of freedom – as a condition that enables a person to be true to himself, and also as a criterion for judging whether it is fair to hold a person responsible for their actions.

© PROF. CHING-HUNG WOO 2016

The late Ching-Hung Woo was for many years Professor of Physics at the University of Maryland.

The New Argument About Freedom

Natasha Gilbert says out with the old arguments, and in with the new.

There has been a recent surge of interest in the old problem of free will. But away from time-worn debates over the questions ‘Are we free?’ and ‘Are we morally responsible?’ some fresh waters are at last in reach. As I will show, some progress can be made here by putting the age-old problem of determinism aside *and* by giving up the libertarian ghost. This will leave us open to asking new, clear and sensible questions in a debate that is surely close to everyone’s heart.

Traditionally, conflicting positions on free will have diverged and defined themselves according to the question: ‘Are free will and moral responsibility compatible with determinism?’ It does seem that we are free to act, if our choice is not the result of external coercion and reflects our own desires, beliefs and deliberations. This is enough for ‘compatibilists’ to grant us moral responsibility for these actions and declare that free will is compatible with determinism.

However ‘libertarians’ are steadfast in their plea for persons to be truly deserving of praise and blame. If determinism is true then the situations in which we make our choices, and the desires and beliefs upon which we base them, are the inevitable result of chains of cause and effect starting long before our births. So in what sense can we be truly responsible for them? To secure the libertarian quest for moral responsibility it is required that a person is self-determined, rather than merely not physically determined by something else or the result of chance. But as Galen Strawson has demonstrated, any attempts at establishing this will lead to a self-defeating infinite regress.

Consider that a choice or free action must be done for a reason to be non-arbitrary. The reason can be in the form of principles, preferences or values. But if someone is responsible for their actions, they must act in accordance with principles, preferences or values they themselves have freely chosen: that is, one must be responsible for the preferences upon which one acts. The question must then arise, where do these preferences come from? In order to be responsible for our preferences, etc, they too must be chosen in a reasoned and con-

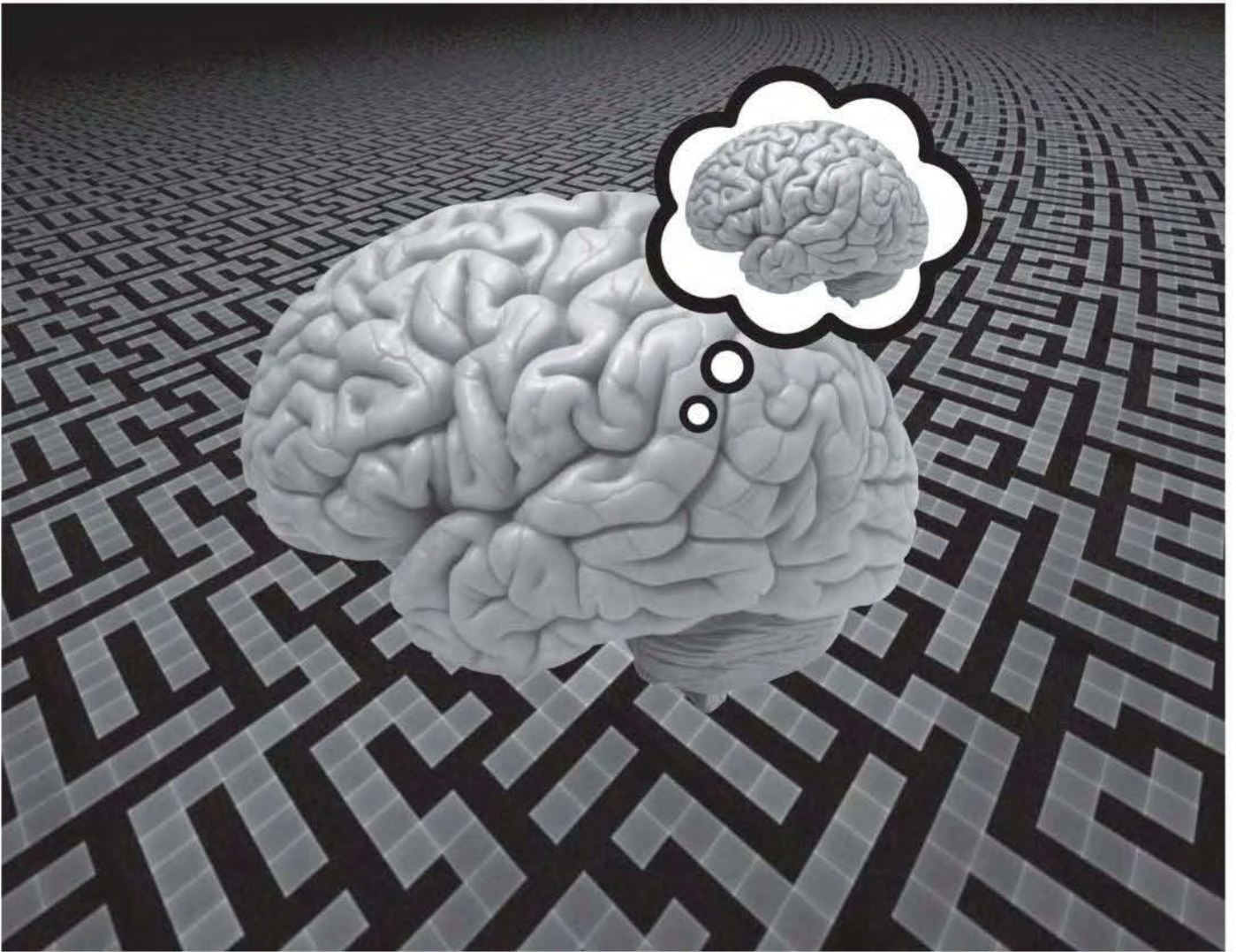
scious fashion. But for this to be the case, one would have to exist prior to that choice, with a certain set of preferences about how to choose one’s preferences in a reasoned and conscious fashion. And so it goes on. It seems then that being the sort of person one is, having the desires and beliefs one does, is something over which we cannot have ultimate control – it’s only the result of our upbringing, etc. And one’s life and all one does is an unfolding of non-self-chosen preferences. So ultimately speaking, one is not free in any meaningful sense. Determinism is not the problem with responsibility, then; rather, it’s the incoherence of the libertarian quest. As Strawson says, “True self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite regress of choices and principles of choice” (*Freedom and Belief*, 1986, p.29).

What is striking about this is that since the argument didn’t appeal to determinism, it seems that the problem that has been the bane of the free will debate can be dispensed with. This realisation opens up a whole new avenue of investigation. Determinism is moot, but this does not mean that the issue of moral responsibility is also dispensed with. Rather the question becomes something like “Is moral responsibility compatible with the ultimate absence of libertarian free will?”

Strawson’s approach to this question is to take the same line as the hard determinist: he concludes that moral responsibility is impossible, and hence that it would be wrong to praise or blame anyone on account of his or her actions. In response, Professor Saul Smilansky, author of *Free Will and Illusion* (2000), claims that Strawson demonstrates the impossibility of libertarian free will, but not of moral responsibility; even though libertarianism is incoherent so that ultimate responsibility eludes us, there still remains the real and important compatibilist sense in which we are free to act and so can take responsibility for our actions. For the compatibilist, distinguishing between an action that was coerced and one that was conducted with autonomy is relevant to the way we should treat the agent. Consider Adam, Beryl and Cheryl. Adam steals something whilst Beryl does not. Cheryl also steals, but is a kleptomaniac. The hard determinist perspective hold all

“ True self-determination is impossible because it requires the actual completion of an infinite regress of choices and principles of choice. ”

Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*



morally equal – as morally irresponsible. From the compatibilist perspective, however, since both Adam and Beryl were able to resist, yet only Beryl did, there are grounds for holding Adam responsible. However, since Cheryl is a born kleptomaniac, we have reason to distinguish her from Adam. Despite some potential ultimate injustice in holding Adam responsible and punishing him, to hold Cheryl responsible and punish her would be much more unjust. In fact, the failure of hard determinism in distinguishing between such cases shows its inadequacy.

It has been shown that determinism need no longer be our main concern in considering moral responsibility, since the problem over it arises whether determinism is true or false. The futile search for libertarian free will can also at last be laid to rest. I have tentatively suggested what seems the most fruitful avenue of investigation from this point: this is also Smilansky's suggestion, to "start from the collapse that results from the realization of the absence of libertarian free will and its implications, and then reconstruct the free will related conceptual world on the basis of the shallower compatibilist resources" (from a personal correspondence).

A revolution is occurring in the debate on free will that requires the renouncement of instinctively-held ideals and beliefs. The first step is to renounce the idea that the central problem concerns determinism. This will in turn pave the way for the truth about libertarianism to be seen. Giving up libertarianism, however, isn't a step to be taken lightly, since it encapsulates the kind of freedom we normatively think we have and need. The greatest obstacle therefore, is going to be whether people can live with the truth concerning free will.

© NATASHA GILBERT 2016

Natasha Gilbert is a freelance journalist. She has an MSc in the Philosophy of Science from the London School of Economics.

Finding out more

- Galen Strawson, (1986) *Freedom and Belief*, Oxford University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0199247509
- Saul Smilansky, (2000) *Free Will and Illusion*, Oxford University Press, ISBN-13: 978-0198250180

The Brain's Risk/Reward System Makes Our Choices, Not Us

Graham W. Boyd argues that choice is an illusion.

"Recently I was trying to explain to an intelligent woman the problem of trying to understand how it is we perceive anything at all, and I was not having any success. She could not see why there was a problem. Finally in despair I asked her how she herself thought she saw the world. She replied that she probably had somewhere in her head something like a little television set. 'So who,' I asked 'is looking at it?' She now saw the problem immediately." F.H. Crick, in *Scientific American*, 1979

The first question to be answered is: Who or what is running the show? In Part 1 I will attempt to explain human decision-making without the need for a hidden homunculus. Part 2 will then go on to look at how the brain can operate within this environment to generate the impression of an individual being driven by a highly conscious self.

The arguments over what has become known as the 'mind-body problem' go back at least to René Descartes' Seventeenth Century dualist view that there's 'mind stuff' and 'body stuff' and the two are quite separate, the mind stuff being ethereal. In the face of all the neuroscience data accumulated since Descartes' time, I view this as a truly embarrassing stance to take in the Twenty-First Century, so the first part of this article will be concerned with seeing if we can get around it. I think we can. My approach is a tad autocratic and the conclusion equally radical, so be warned.

Let's look first look at how the brain makes its decisions.

Part 1: DECISIONS

There are two major ways of processing information facilitated by the human brain. I hold that all decisions are made by a risk/reward comparison of the incoming sensory information within the emotional brain ('System 1 thinking') rather than within the rational brain ('System 2 thinking'). System 1, the emotional system for processing sensory information and generating responses to it according to a risk or reward weighting, is automatic, intuitive, and fast, even impulsive. System 2 is the

rational, slow, and controlled system of thought, where we reason through our options. (For more about these systems of thought, see *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman, 2011.)

Tucked away in the centre of the brain, System 1 monitors the environment one way or another to minimize risk to survival and maximize reward. Feedback continually updates the system about the environment. The emotional response system evaluates all the incoming sensory information, and then scores it for a 'winner-takes-all' competition to decide on the best response. My contention in this article is that System 1 interacting with incoming sensory information runs everything. There is no room for any homunculus here.

The details of the process are intriguing. All incoming sense data are converted into a 'common cerebral currency', placed into context, assessed for their predicted risk or reward value in the emotional brain, and the likely error of that assessment. The results are then ranked in what I have dubbed emotion scores, to allow disparate information to be compared until a successful competitor for stimulating a response emerges within the system. This decision and choice mechanism is quantitatively quite precise (see my *On Stress Disease and Evolution: A Unifying Theory*, 2012, to see just how precise: eprints.utas.edu.au/12671/).

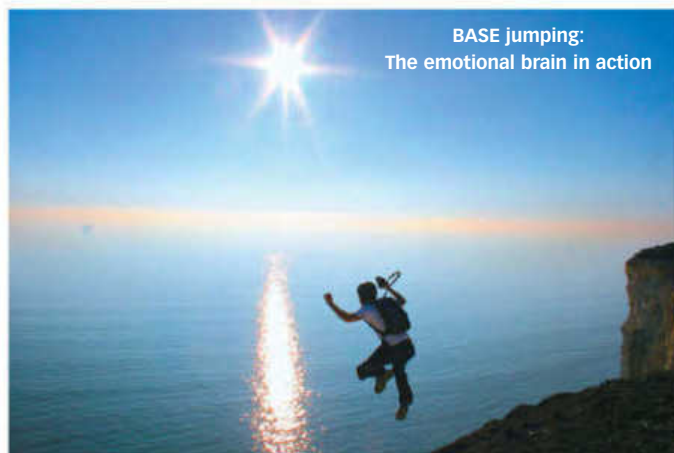
Not a bad start? Then welcome to the world of System 1. But of course you will now go and spoil things by asking: 'What about the capacity for rational thought? Can that be accommodated within this way of thinking?'

Well, actually, yes it can, but in a rather complex way.

The Rational Brain

It is now clear that the two systems for decision-making in man operate so-called 'dual process monitoring' (see for instance De Neys and Glumicic in *Cognition* Vol. 106, 2008). I see the mechanism for this dual processing being as follows. If at any time a certain threshold for alerting System 1 is not exceeded, judgement is withheld, and the more deliberative, rational System 2 may come into play. Nonetheless, the intuitive, emotional system still tends to strongly dominate. De Neys and Glumicic have found that subjects struggle to override the instinctive emotional risk/reward brain responses, since rational thought options often do not receive enough cerebral 'weight' to prevail over the choices of the emotional brain.

My suggestion for how to understand that is as follows. The emotional brain always harvests the best option for response as the one having the highest risk/reward emotion score, *whether this score is derived primarily from the emotional brain, or indirectly via the rational brain*. If nothing above a certain threshold is produced from the primary analysis of the incoming sensory information by the emotional system, then analysis is switched to the slower deliberations of the rational system. But – and here's the rub – the eventual risk/reward score calculated is not estimated primarily through a 'rational ranking', but rather, is based on the



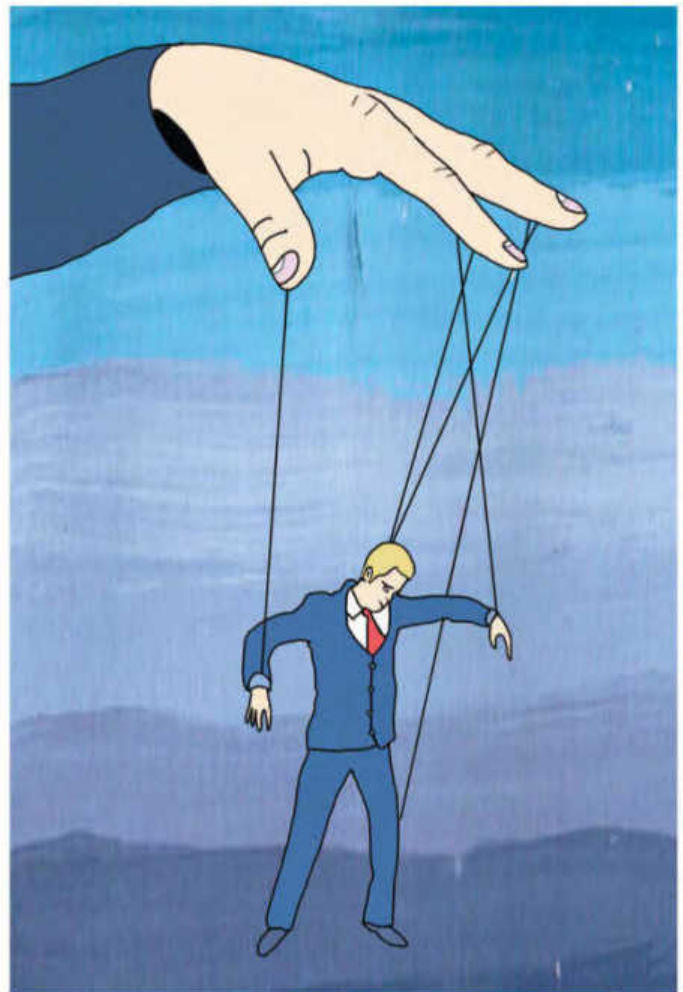
SAMI LAMING BASE JUMPING BEACHY HEAD
© SAMI LAMING. SEE FACEBOOK.COM/LAMINGONTHESKY

risk/reward value of that response to the *emotional* brain. Moreover, because of the way the brain works, the emotional score of rational deliberations is likely to often be less than rating from any analysis primarily through the emotional system. In effect then: *Rational options are chosen if and only if the emotion scores they evoke in the evaluation of the emotional brain are high enough to beat the scores of any more intuitive competitor responses.*

The situation here is complex. It takes time and trouble to allocate emotional risk/reward scores to rational system response options so that they can compete in the emotional brain. Actually, given the magnitude and complexity of the task involved, the wonder is that rational options ever manage to get converted into having competitive emotional risk/reward scores at all. All that the rational system would have to go on would be past experience; and at best, that would merely be analogous to any present situation rather than precisely the same – meaning that the process of converting rational options to emotional risk/reward options will often lead to an underestimation of their persuasiveness. By contrast, the emotional brain has an innate strength and creates correspondingly strong options because of its long evolutionary history of development to aid survival. This system is not easily overcome. This would explain why deliberations about *rational* options often carry less ‘weight’. In effect, System 2 is generally less ‘assertive’. It is also circumspect, and lazy (see Kahneman, p.44).

The upshot of all this is that if any assessment of any situation by the emotional brain scores above threshold at first pass, it decides the response without deliberation being required. But if not, an option on the same information through the *rational* mode of thought can still occasionally win on being converted back to a emotional brain score. Its emotional score can improve with experience and training to eventually prevail in specific cases. This is what learning logic is all about. For example, once it has learned the value of Venn diagrams in solving some logic problems, the rational brain can use Venn diagram thinking in others. So the rational brain may be less assertive, but aspects of it may be more trainable than emotional brain processes, causing them to eventually dominate and be preferred in particular cases. However I hold that, in the end, they will be useful in reaching decisions only if they have enough ‘appeal’ in the emotional brain to outbid their more intuitive rivals. Put another way – whether we like it or not, we choose rational options only insofar as they are judged to be potentially more emotionally rewarding than their intuitive rivals – in essence, only if our rational deliberations ‘feel’ better. (Of course, rational options can be of value in making decisions even when they merely *inform* the intuitive decision-making process.)

Let’s take a breath, because this point about the emotion scoring of rational options is not easy, and I want to make sure it is grasped. The whole emotion scoring system I’ve described I see as being eventually based entirely on the long-established evolutionarily-derived intuitive, risk-reward emotional information-processing system 1. Everything would be a lot simpler if options could be ranked for their rationality, and then allowed to compete directly with intuitive options from the emotional system. But that is not how it works: the only scoring system available is that based on the emotional responses evoked within the risk/reward system, so options arising from



DETERMINISM RULES © JACK HODGES 2016 PLEASE VISIT WWW.JACKHODGES.TUMBLR.COM

the rational system need to have their rational scores converted to emotional scores before they can compete. In the situations described, they occasionally do; but overall, “the emotional tail wags the rational dog” (Kahneman, p.140). Incidentally, there is no reason to think that any of this evaluation need be carried out at a conscious level.

Autonomy of Decision-Making

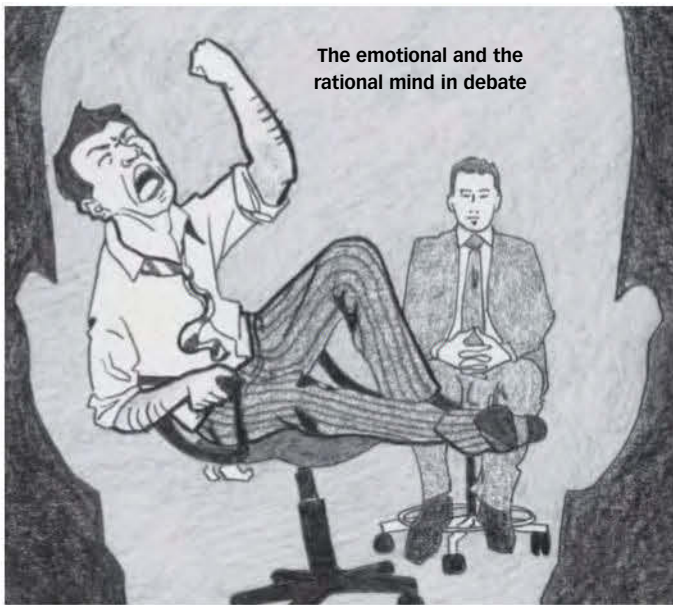
All this bears directly on the question: ‘Can the whole system run autonomously – that is, with our responses, even our thoughts, being determined *entirely* by the sensory input interacting with the emotional brain?’

Indeed it can. The brain has no need of any homunculus or remote-control television viewer to drive it. And that is by far and away the most important conclusion I have to offer here.

So how come it all looks so much otherwise – so much as if we are in control of our reactions as conscious selves? Let me now try to convince you that the self is an artificial construct – that self-consciousness is the product of the brain interacting with incoming information in the way I’ve just discussed, and that all this together gives the false impression of primary consciousness with an active self in charge.

Part 2: CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SELF

Following Benjamin Libet’s seminal studies (originally published in *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* Vol.8, 1985), it is clear that



consciousness is late on the scene of any brain activity. This means that consciousness is an epiphenomenon: it is produced by brain activity, but does not itself influence brain activity. Given this, I suggest that final decisions from the brain are simply *fed into* a construct we call the self.

All gets a bit complicated here, so let's look at the self first.

The Self

There are generally held to be two sorts of selves: the bodily self, or 'self-as-object'; and the first-person self, the 'inner I', the 'self-as-subject' – supposedly the self in active charge of everything – meaning that the individual experiences that the highest linguistic deliberations of the brain are referred for output to this inner self-construct 'as if' to an active self-as-subject. However, I suggest that this first person self-as-subject construct is not at all actively in charge of volition, attention and decision-making in the way we experience and so profoundly believe it to be. Instead, culture, especially language, play a large part both in this self's development and in our illusion that it has control.

The way I see everything developing is as follows.

As the child matures and gets a grasp of language, society expects her to be accountable for her actions – a controlling 'self-as-subject.' But there is no such active self controlling everything: the brain's conscious output is determined entirely by the competitive risk/reward emotion-scoring system(s) I described. Above this, there remains only the individual with her passive inner self-construct – that is her experience of being a self that has been created through other brain activity. Nonetheless, given social pressure, the child must respond 'appropriately'. She does so in the only way she can – by unwittingly allowing her passive inner self-construct be formed *as if* it were the active self in charge. Again though, the apparently active nature of this newly deemed 'self-as-subject' is illusory. There is no inner active self driving thought and behaviour – just a passive inner self-construct to which all of the higher brain's language-based output (including 'rational choice') is referred for 'ownership' to make it seem that there is, and in the process satisfy social expectations.

Self-Consciousness

From this I also suggest that the acquisition of language skills is vital for establishing yet another layer of higher human brain functioning – self-consciousness.

For a human being to achieve her maximum potential awareness of the outside world, she must learn the language skills of her cultural group. This gives her a highly sophisticated means of processing information to understand and describe the world – including names for various entities and a grasp of the value of models and metaphors in coming to terms with difficult new concepts.

Once the sense of self-as-subject has been constructed, the individual is in possession of a robust (if false) sense of an active inner 'I'. It then becomes natural for this construct to appear to own the language-based higher brain output too. I suggest that when this happens, that brain's output becomes what we call 'self-conscious' and the illusion is complete: it then appears certain to us that we are a true active inner self in charge of the stream of consciousness – the very homunculus watching and controlling the television screen. Self-consciousness is thus seen here as being essentially an emergent feature of the grounding of all language-based higher-brain output in the self-as-subject. It is a state of awareness of the world so heightened over that of non-linguistic creatures that it is deemed to warrant the distinct term 'self-consciousness'. The more that society and the world are experienced and learned over time via such communication, the more self-consciousness each individual attains. Yet from this perspective, neither self-consciousness nor the self-as-subject plays any role in the creation of thought. They are entirely secondary, non-causal phenomena resulting from higher brain activity – the effect and not the cause of the way the world becomes known, of how the individual comes to be 'with knowledge' (con-scious).

All this is not to say that those without language are not conscious in some way. It's just that I see self-consciousness as a state of awareness so heightened by language that it deserves to be distinguished from it. By this reckoning, animal awareness could include a lower level of consciousness. Also, the more communication an individual masters, the more awareness – and eventually self-consciousness – is attained. It's all a matter of degree.

These, then, are my views.

Challenging? Well, that's the whole point.

Conclusion

The brain makes its decisions via its emotion-scoring risk/reward system interacting with sensory input from the environment, with its outputs being much less rational than we think. Inputs from the rational system occasionally receive sufficiently high 'emotion scores' to successfully compete. This system has no need of any mysterious Cartesian mind to drive it. The self and self-consciousness are both passive constructs, although society's interaction with the individual determines that they come to be viewed otherwise. So that's it – all with apologies to Descartes, of course.

© PROF. GRAHAM W. BOYD 2016

The late Graham Boyd was Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the University of Tasmania, and an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Medicine at the University of Western Australia.

Akrasia

Why Do We Act Against Our Better Judgement?

George Singleton asks why we splash out on luxuries worth a month's income, struggle to give up smoking, and resort to below-the-belt insults in heated arguments.

Almost all heavy smokers are well aware of the likely consequences of their tobacco tendencies. Many even concede that it would be best to give up the habit. Still, a large proportion of these people cannot help but continue to smoke, in spite of their better judgement. Between puffs of nicotine and regret, they may ask themselves, 'Why do I continue to smoke when I know it would be better not to?' One response to this question – although not one in everyday terms – is that smoking is an *akratic* action. *Akrasia* comes from the Greek for 'lacking control of oneself', and it means 'to act against one's better judgement'.

The Platonic/Socratic Response

Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* addresses a more general incarnation of the smoker's question. There Plato's spokesman Socrates asks, if one judges a certain behaviour to be the best course of action, why would one do anything else? The conclusion that Socrates draws is that people will only ever choose the perceived best course of action, since "no-one goes willingly towards the bad." That is to say, for Socrates, *akrasia* does not exist. Rather wrongdoing stems from ignorance of what exactly is good, not someone consciously doing what they know to be wrong. So his view is that if someone *actually* believed that they should stop smoking, they would do so with ease. Socrates does allow that the person who *apparently* acts against their better judgement will say that it's because they're overcome by the pleasure their action provides. Yet to him this is a self-contradiction, since their argument actually translates into: "I knew that act was bad, but I was overcome by my perceiving the good of it."

Socrates' argument here fatally relies upon the acceptance of a fairly large false assumption: that goodness and pleasure are the same. His argument cannot work if one rejects the notion that goodness and pleasure are interchangeable.

Let us spare smokers the limelight briefly, and turn to the example of the heroin addict. Heroin provides the user with enormous amounts of pleasure; but this is not the same as heroin addiction being *good*. Regardless of the pleasure induced, can abuse of a substance that results in such a high likelihood of death by overdosing, or choking on one's vomit, or through severe damage to one's veins, ever be considered *good*? Whilst there may be no definitive philosophical answer to this, it makes Socrates'/Plato's viewpoint questionable, at the very least.

Aristotle's Response

Aristotle disagrees with Plato about *akrasia*. He takes an approach more in line with actual experience than his teacher's purely theoretical angle.



It is natural, Aristotle argues, for humans to acknowledge *akrasia*. Indeed, he argues for two different kinds of *akrasia*. The first is motivated by impetuosity, or more specifically, passion, which can cause a *lapse in reason* allowing a person to be led away from what they (still) believe to be good actions.

This analysis seems more reasonable than Plato's approach, as it explains many scenarios, such as the heroin example: the intense pleasure brought about by such substances can cause a lapse in reason. However, examples of such *akrasia* are by no means limited to addiction, or even pleasure. Other types of passion, such as anger, can also hinder our judgement.

Consider a heated argument. Things are often said in the heat of the moment that are clearly not fully thought through: those involved might digress into petty insults, and go too far. In this case, the person is so blinded by anger that they act without a reasonable consideration of the consequences of what they're doing – the insult is swiftly pushed out of one's mouth by one's ego, rather than being properly assessed by one's super-ego, we might say. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BCE), Aristotle compares these instances to "hasty servants who run out before they have heard the whole of what one says, and then muddle the order." The servants do not properly evaluate their action – they simply do it without stopping to think.

In her *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (1992), Amélie Rorty examines the extent to which these ideas are similar or dissimilar to the Platonic/Socratic perspective. In Rorty's view, Aristotle stands the Socratic diagnosis of *akratic* ignorance on its head. She says that rather than a person being misled by pleasure into ignorance of what's good, Aristotle contends that a person's ignorance causes them to be misled by pleasure. Perhaps it is no surprise that Aristotle therefore reaches the opposite conclusion – that *akrasia* does, in fact, exist.

The second type of *akrasia* Aristotle details is caused by *weakness*. In contrast to the passionate person, the weak person

considers and reasons perfectly. The weakness comes in putting their reasoned conclusion into practice.

Although they may have hoped to escape further scrutiny, let us bring back the eager-to-quit smoker. If a person decides that they should swap their cigarettes for nicotine patches or chewing carrots, but struggles to actually do so, then the fault is not in their reasoning ability. They have considered the act of smoking, reached the conclusion that it is bad for them and that they should stop, but they cannot put this conclusion into practice. This is what Aristotle means when he refers to weakness of the will.

Contemporary Responses

Aristotle's concept of two kinds of *akrasia* has aged well. For instance, many scholars have written on the disengagement of the will – although some hold the view that this can be different to what Aristotle talks about in his second type of *akrasia*. Richard Holton for example gives two slightly different reasons as to why someone who concedes the vegetarians' arguments may not give up meat. The first case he gives is one of a man who repeatedly pledges to become a herbivore only to "find himself succumbing time and again in the face of rare steaks and slow-cooked offal", as Holton so delightfully puts it in *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality* (eds Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet, 2013). He also gives a second case, of a man agreeing in principle that he should give up meat, but never intending to do so in practice. Both cases, he says, are examples of acting against one's better judgement, but only the first is a case of weak-willedness. This is not to say that there *must* be these two separate types in all cases – only that something being *akratic* does not automatically mean that it is a weakness of the will.

The late Donald Davidson also argues in *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980) that earlier thinkers were wrong to limit *akrasia* to people who had reached a judgement but were driven off the path their conclusion indicated. He adds any *altered conclusion* into the mix; for example, someone who generally thinks it's irrational for them to simply give into their desires, but yet gives themselves the pleasure of a particular choice. Davidson thinks that in this case an *akratic* action is the result of a person tem-

porarily thinking that the one action is preferable to the other. If for example I walk past a shop window and see a snazzy pair of New Balances (trainers, for readers unfamiliar with the dialect of a seventeen-year-old) costing my entire month's income, I'm faced with two options: to buy the trainers, or to reserve my income for the next four weeks. The latter is the best decision; but I have chosen the former before, and I would be surprised if I never do so again. Davidson would say the root of my *akratic* purchase of the trainers has its origins in my momentarily believing that ownership of the flashy shoes is preferable to prolonged financial stability. It is not that I have acted against my better judgement in that moment; rather, it is that in that moment, my better judgement has changed to choose the trainers.

There is also a more science-based contemporary *akratic* theory. One can explain the purchase of the New Balances through the idea that humans are psychologically very now-focused. I will reap the rewards of purchasing the trainers immediately, but I shall not appreciate the money that I have saved until later, and as a result, the value of the trainers seems greater – so I will choose this otherwise seemingly-illogical option.

This idea is called *hyperbolic discounting*. It is actually an established microeconomic model, but it can be applied to non-monetary situations as well. It says that when presented with a choice of two similar rewards, the impatient human mind will always opt for the one that arrives sooner. Moreover, one will actually *devalue* the reward that comes later. George Ainslie argues in *Breakdown of Will* (2008) that this devaluation is furthered if the delay times of the two options are increased by the same amount. This may sound like difficult-to-digest microeconomic waffle; but when applied, it is commonsense. Consider the following two types of choice. First, if I can have £100 today or £150 in a month, I will feel more inclined to pick the former. But now let's add a year to both options: I can have £100 in twelve months, or £150 in thirteen months. Bizarrely, the £150 option immediately appears more preferable in the second scenario than in the first.

Various Judgements

Regardless of which cause of acting against one's better judgement one believes is most likely, it is difficult not to dismiss Plato's argument that it doesn't exist. It seems that here Plato leads with theory, and not with experience or evidence. This is in line with other aspects of his philosophy: he does believe that the material world is a type of illusion, after all.

Aristotle's two kinds of *akrasia* seem reasonable, but the type of explanation offered by Ainslie and many other contemporary psychology-influenced philosophers seems equally plausible. It is possible that several explanations may be true, since there is no necessary contradiction between them – Ainslie's ideas could, for instance, function as a third way beside impetuosity and weakness. In any case, whilst it is not unreasonable to suggest that "no-one goes willingly towards the bad" it is unreasonable to conclude from this that no-one ever acts against their better judgement. Any one of us can examine our own lives and see an abundance of *akrasia*.

© GEORGE SINGLETON 2016

George Singleton has a particular interest in the work of Peter Singer, and hopes to study philosophy at university from September.



Reclaiming Freedom

Steve Taylor says of determinism: "I refute it thus!"

One of the main trends of recent academic culture has been to take freedom and autonomy away from human beings. I don't mean that professors armed with guns have been locking up their intellectual opponents; I mean that from sociology to philosophy, from psychology to neuroscience, a common theme has been to try to show that our 'free will' is either severely limited or non-existent, and that we have much less control over our own lives than we'd like to believe.

It was one of the central beliefs of behaviourist psychology. You might *feel* as if you are free, making your own decisions and choices, but in reality everything you do, or think, or feel, is the result of environmental influences. Your behaviour is just the 'output' or response to the 'input' or stimuli which your brain has absorbed and processed. Freudian psychology also emphasized the lack of free will. It suggested that your conscious self is just one small facet of your whole psyche – the tip of the iceberg – and that its activity is determined by your unconscious mind, which includes instinctive and other automatic biological drives beyond your conscious control.

By contrast, existentialist philosophy and humanistic psychology emphasised human autonomy, asserting that choice is one of the defining characteristics of human life, even if it isn't necessarily a positive faculty. According to Søren Kierkegaard, the sheer extent of our freedom may induce a state of disorientation and dread, and we make our choices "in fear and trembling." Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre believed that the freedom to choose courses of action without fully controlling or even knowing their consequences contributed to human anxiety. In his famous phrase, we are "condemned to be free." And in reaction to behaviourism and Freudian psychology, humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers asserted that human behaviour is not necessarily determined by our past and present experiences, since we always have the capacity to make choices based on our assessments of current situations.

However, in sociology, there was a movement towards the denial of autonomy. Theorists argued that your sense of self is a 'social construction' and that people are necessarily formed and exist inside a nexus of social influences which determine their lives. Linguistic theorists also argued that our view of reality is created through and limited by our language. We cannot see beyond the assumptions in the framework of the semantic and grammatical structures we have absorbed from our parents and our cultures.

Gene Theory & Neuroscience

Modern genetics and neuroscience often deny our autonomy in a much more direct way. According to geneticists such as Richard Dawkins, we – our bodies and minds – exist as 'carriers' for our genes, to enable them to survive and replicate. Everything we do is determined by and is on behalf of our genes. Our behaviour is either the result of our own instinctive – and there-

fore unchosen – desire to increase our reproductive success, or else is the instinctive result of traits selected and developed in our ancestors because they provided some survival advantage. So the reason why some of us feel driven to gain success in fields like politics and creativity, is because success makes us more attractive to the opposite sex, and so increases our reproductive possibilities; or, for example, according to Steven Pinker, the reason we find lush countryside landscapes beautiful is because for our ancestors such vistas represented a plentiful supply of resources to foster their survival, so nature selected those who were drawn to such landscapes.

In much neuroscience, brain activity – that is, the behaviour of neuronal networks and brain chemicals – play a similar causal role to genes. Your moods, your desires, and your behaviour, are determined by the levels of various brain chemicals such as serotonin or dopamine, or by the automatic activation of neuronal networks which predispose you to certain traits or impulses. If you feel depressed, it's because of a low level of serotonin. If you are psychopathic, it's because areas of your ventromedial prefrontal cortex are less active than normal. If you are a Born Again Christian, it's because you have a smaller than normal hippocampus. (The latter two are actual neuroscientific hypotheses.)

These versions of both contemporary gene theory and neuroscience are what might be called 'can't help' approaches: we 'can't help' being depressive, psychopathic, religious, racist, polygamous (if you are a male), and so forth, because our genes have programmed us to be so, or because we have been biologically burdened with the brain chemistry or neural networks associated with that behaviour.

Harnessing Free Will

What is the root of these assaults on our autonomy? Why do intellectuals and scientists feel such a strong impulse to show us that we are powerless, controlled by forces beyond our own control?

Perhaps it's an unconscious desire to abdicate responsibility. Perhaps the modern world has become so complex and stressful that scientists and philosophers feel an impulse to retreat from responsibility, to pretend that we have no control over the chaos. I wouldn't go so far myself, but a conspiracy theorist might argue (and some already have) that this autonomy-denial is a form of oppression – an attempt by the intellectual elite to keep us down, convincing us that we are powerless so that we won't challenge their authority. More rationally, the rash of free will denial may be related to the desire to prove that there is no 'self'. Free will is, of course, one of the strongest features of the self. If you believe that inside our mental space there is 'no one there' – that our sense of self is 'just an illusion', which itself is a mere side-effect of neurological processes – then you have to believe that the self's free will is an illusion, too.

Yet no matter what the motivation, one is tempted to reply to these assaults on free will in the same way that the eighteenth century author Doctor Johnson responded to George Berkeley's arguments that matter was a mental phenomenon: he shouted "I refute it thus!" as he kicked a stone. Johnson could have used the same method to illustrate the denial of determinism and his capacity for free will. It's difficult for anyone to persuasively argue that we don't have free will when our everyday experience is that there are always a variety of choices of thoughts and actions in front of us, like a pack of cards spread for us to pick from, and we feel we have the freedom to choose any of them, and to change our minds at any point. After all, whenever you read a book or listen to a lecture claiming that there is no such thing as free will, you're free to close the book, or to throw a rotten tomato at the lecturer.

One of the problems is that scientists, and philosophers, often tend towards absolutism. Geneticists may argue that behaviour is *completely* determined by our genes; neuroscientists that behaviour is *completely* determined by brain activity; social constructionists and behaviourists may argue that social and environmental forces *completely* determine our behaviour, and so forth. But in my view, it's more sensible to be democratic than absolutist: it's likely that all of these factors have *some* influence on our behaviour. They all affect us to some degree. But none of them individually, nor all of them together, are completely dominant.

I believe the same is true of free will. The conscious self is not an authoritarian dictator; but it isn't a slave either. Rather, our free will is another factor or force amongst this chaotic coalition of influences. The upshot of that is that no matter what social and environmental forces influence me, no matter

what genes or brain structure I've inherited from my parents, I'm in here too, and I can decide whether to kick the stone or not, and, generally speaking, how I react to the world.

Freedom Strikes Back

Interestingly, some popular neuroscientific ideas about the limitations of free will are being contradicted by neuroscience itself. For instance, recent research has shown that rather than being fixed, our brain structure is very flexible, and continually changing: the brain is not hard-wired but soft-wired. The relatively new field of neuroplasticity shows that practicing habits or behaviours brings real physical changes to the parts of the brain associated with those activities. For example, if you begin to learn to play the piano, you will develop more neural connections, and perhaps, through the process of neurogenesis, even more brain cells themselves, in the parts of the brain associated with motor activity – the motor cortex and cerebellum – and musical perception – in the temporal lobes. Or if you meditate regularly for years, you will develop more 'gray matter' in the areas associated with attention, concentration and compassion – in the frontal lobes. So in this sense, rather than being completely controlled by our brains, we have control over *them*.

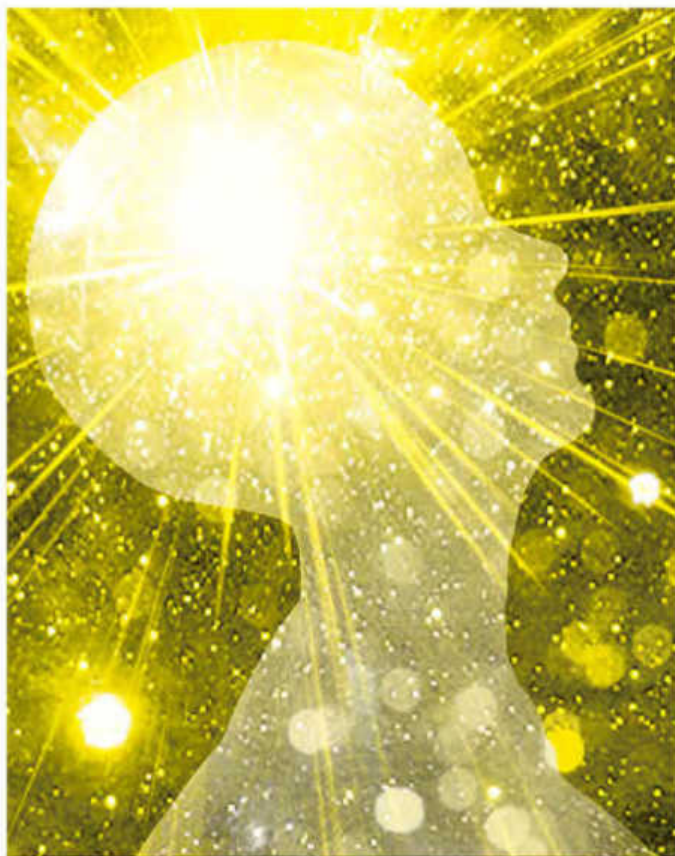
Rigid determinism in gene theory is similarly contradicted by recent findings in genetics. The field of *epigenetics* shows that the genetic structures we inherit from our parents don't remain fixed throughout our lives either, but are altered by our life experiences, so that the biology we pass on to our children will be different from that we inherited. For example, experiments training mice to develop an aversion to a particular smell have shown that this aversion was genetically passed down to their offspring, who became two hundred times more sensitive to the smell than other mice. This new behaviour is reflected in changes to both the genes and brain structure of the mice. Similarly, in human beings, studies show that twins exposed to very different environments and experiences show striking differences in their DNA in later life. Or, in a Swedish study of the descendants of a population which endured famine in the Nineteenth Century, it was found that the men had inherited a much stronger than normal resistance to cardiovascular disease, whilst those women descended from women who had been exposed to the famine while in the womb had a shorter than average life span.

One application of these findings would be to actively take responsibility for our genes, knowing that the health and well-being of our descendants depends on them. We could make a conscious effort to live positively, to be free of trauma and stress, and undergo as many positive and rich experiences as possible, to ensure that the genetic inheritance we pass on is as ideal as possible. It could be said that we have the capacity to control our genes rather than them just controlling us.

Increasing Free Will

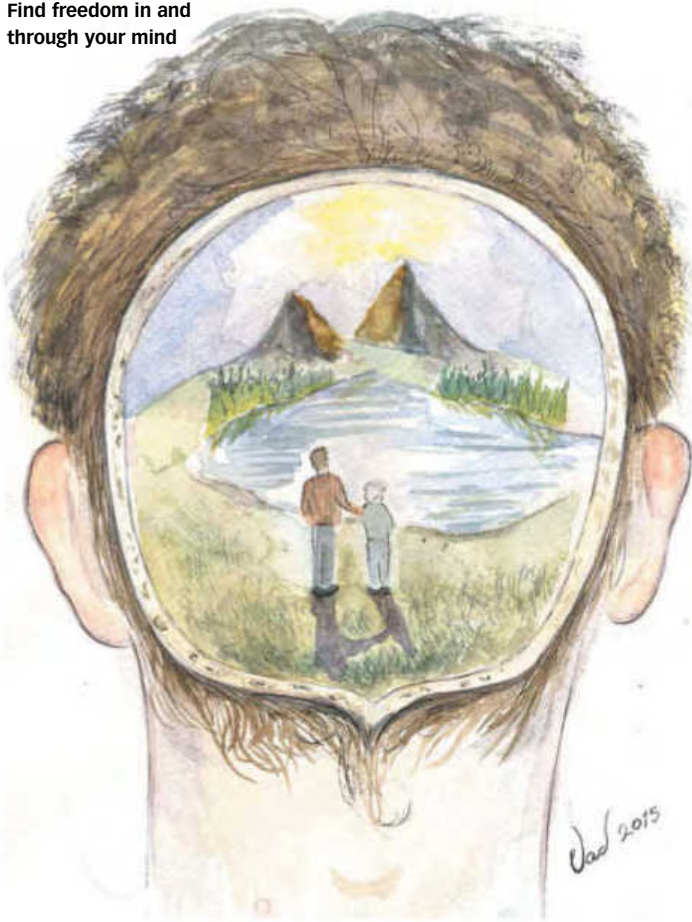
I would argue that one of the most important tasks of our lives is to develop more free will and autonomy. In fact, a primary way to develop positively and begin to live more meaningfully is to transcend the influences of our environment to become more oriented towards who we authentically are.

As humanistic psychology suggests, we have innate poten-



Find freedom in and through your mind

CARTOON © VADIM DOZMOROV 2015. PLEASE VISIT VADIM.CREVADO.COM



tials and characteristics that are independent of external factors, even if this aspect of us may be so obscured from us that we can barely see it. To humanistic psychology, our task is to allow that part of us to express itself more fully – which often means overriding adverse cultural and social influences. The same thinking applies to genes and brain chemistry too. They may predispose us to certain types of behaviour, but we can resist those influences, to control and even re-mould our behaviour. It's by no means easy, but we can overcome our programming. We don't have to blindly follow the environmental, genetic and neurological instructions we were born with. We can with resolve increase the quotient of autonomy with which we were born, to the extent that it becomes more powerful than our genetics, neurology, or the environment. (Strangely, despite his otherwise apparently rigid genetic determinism, Dawkins agrees with this assessment of our potential, stating that humans are the only beings who have the power to ignore the dictates of their genes.)

Paths To Autonomy

Perhaps many people do seem to be largely the products of their environments and biological inheritance. But I would argue that whatever the term 'greatness' means, it is usually manifested by those who have exercised their autonomy to a considerable degree, to significantly free themselves from external influences. These are usually people who have used their strong will-power to harness their autonomy and self-discipline to expand themselves and develop a high level of skill and expertise, to actualise their innate potential, and so become more than the sum of their influences.

In a sense, this is only an extension of what every human being ideally does as they move from childhood to adulthood: to develop more self-control and autonomy. As we move through childhood, with the help of our parents, we hopefully begin to control our impulses and desires. For example, we learn that we can't have everything exactly when we want it, and so learn to delay gratification, developing self-control. As we need less care and attention from our parents, we exercise more autonomy, learn to make more decisions for ourselves and to follow our own interests and goals. In this sense, human development is a process of becoming less bound by biological and environmental influences and gain more free will and autonomy. And ideally, this process should continue throughout our lives.

Spiritual development can also be seen as a process of gaining increased autonomy. For example, many Eastern spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism or yoga, place great emphasis on self-discipline and self-control: control of our own behaviour, so that we no longer cause harm to others; control of our desires, so that we no longer lust after physical pleasures; control of our thoughts, so that we can quieten the mind through meditation, and so on. In some traditions, spiritual development is seen as a process of 'taming' the body and mind, and this is, of course, only possible through intense self-discipline, requiring self-control. Although it can sometimes occur suddenly and spontaneously, the deep serenity and intensified awareness of spiritual awakening is usually the culmination of a long process of increasing our innate quotient of personal freedom to the point where our minds become the dominant influence. When spiritually awakened people are referred to as 'masters', this could easily refer to them as being masters of themselves.

In Western philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche meant something similar with his concept of 'self-overcoming'. Nietzsche spoke disparagingly of the 'Ultimate Man', who is completely satisfied with himself as he is and strives only to make his life as comfortable and pleasurable as possible. But in reality, says Nietzsche, human nature is not fixed or finished. Human beings are part of an evolutionary process – not a goal, but a bridge – "a rope fastened between animal and Superman" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1891). The potential Superman is the human being who is not self-satisfied, who has the urge to 'overcome himself.' For him, life is an attempt at bridging the gulf between animal and superman.

Liberating Freedom

We all possess a degree of freedom, and we all have the capacity to extend the degree of freedom we're bequeathed – to become less dominated by our genes, our brain chemistry, and the society and wider environment into which we're born. We are all potentially much more powerful than we have been led to believe, even to the extent of being able to alter or even control the forces that have been supposed to completely control us. And to a large extent our well-being, our achievements and our sense of meaning in life depend on this. The more you exercise and increase your freedom, the more meaningful and fulfilling your life will be.

© DR STEVE TAYLOR 2016

Steve Taylor is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Leibniz & the Infinite Mechanism of Life

Audrey Borowski peers into the infinity inside all organisms, including us.

Far from shunning the infinite as his philosophical predecessors Pascal and Descartes had done, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) embraced and celebrated it, seeing it as a mark of the divine. According to him, the infinite permeated reality, in the microscopic as well as in the infinitely large, in such a manner that “every particle of the universe contains a world of an infinity of creatures” (Leibniz, *Collected Papers and Letters*, Series 6, Volume 4, 1647-8).

Leibniz was writing at a time of intellectual upheaval. The early Seventeenth Century had ushered in an era of scientific discoveries and innovations – an era in which *mechanism*, as exemplified by *clockwork*, had emerged as the privileged conceptual tool through which to elucidate and grasp the cosmos, the state, and even the human body. The application of this mechanized world picture to life was pioneered by René Descartes, who in his *Treatise on Man* of 1637 effectively equated living bodies to complex automata. Descartes could “see no difference between the machines built by artisans and the various bodies composed by nature alone.” (p.50).

Leibniz felt that the moderns had erred in ascribing this godless model to life itself. He set out to restore the uniqueness of life by positing that *infinity* was its defining feature. For Leibniz, even in their smallest parts organisms were machines – and therefore were machines *ad infinitum*, akin to onions that could never be completely peeled. Organisms preserved their infinitely nested mechanical structure, and always remained “the same machine” throughout the various changes they underwent, “being merely transformed through different enfoldings.” (Leibniz, *New System of Nature*, 1695). Moreover, only the particular kind of infinity displayed by natural organisms yielded true unity – which unity in turn endowed them with sensation, perception and consciousness (Letter to Sophie and Elizabeth Charlotte, November 1696). Each was animated by an “always subsisting unity” (*ibid*) – a primitive communications network which also expressed the activity of all the machines nested in it, unfolding in concert with them. Within this mechanism, both material and spiritual realms developed in perfect correspondence whilst never directly interacting, in ‘pre-established harmony’. By contrast, even the most artfully assembled artificial machine could never hope to overcome its essential state of being aggregated from parts. So more than three centuries before debates surrounding artificial intelligence, Leibniz had already warned of the inherently non-conscious nature of artificial machines: although they might behave as if animated by a unifying spiritual force, they would still be essentially soulless.

The infinitely entangled structure of natural machines also founds their indestructibility. Birth and death emerge as mere developments and envelopments of a vast living machinery which, while imperceptible to us, radiate throughout the uni-

verse and are preserved for all eternity. In a passage which may provide us with some solace, Leibniz elaborated that “A natural machine can never be absolutely destroyed just as it can never absolutely begin, but it only decreases or increases, enfolds or unfolds, always preserving in itself some degree of life [*vitalitas*] or, if you prefer, some degree of primitive activity [*actuositas*]” (*On Body and Force, Against the Cartesians*, 1702).

Crucially, Leibniz’s theory of organism provides us with an insight into the kind of paradoxical infinity which drove much of his thought process, and which he deployed throughout his system. From his linguistic investigations to his history of the Earth, infinity for Leibniz is never abstract or quantitative, but thoroughly embodied, continuous, and infinitely nested (except in his mathematical investigations, where he intentionally adopts a fictitious reading of infinity for practical purposes). In its incarnation in this way, infinity cannot be disassociated from some kind of unity. As Leibniz himself often conceded, “My meditations turn on two things, namely unity and infinity.” Indeed, within divinely-inspired reality, the connection between infinity and unity was not one of simple dichotomy, but of interdependence and variety. Indeed, even so-called ‘finite’ human creatures were infinite in their own way.

Leibniz’s theory of organism is also emblematic of his broader *modus operandi*, which involved shunning radical distinctions in favour of subtle variations. Far from rejecting mechanism out of hand, Leibniz co-opted it, reworking it to suit his own purposes. For him, organism referred to an organizational principle rather than a particularly biological sort of stuff: “Organism, that is to say order and artifice, is something essential to matter, produced and arranged by the sovereign wisdom.” (Leibniz, *Philosophical Letters*, vol III, ed C.I. Gerhardt, p.340). Living beings were thus subjected to a particular variety of mechanism, which unfolded infinitely and dynamically. Ultimately, in the “infinite subtlety of their artifice,” natural machines were borne out of divine wisdom, which itself was separated from us by an “immense distance” (*New System of Nature*).

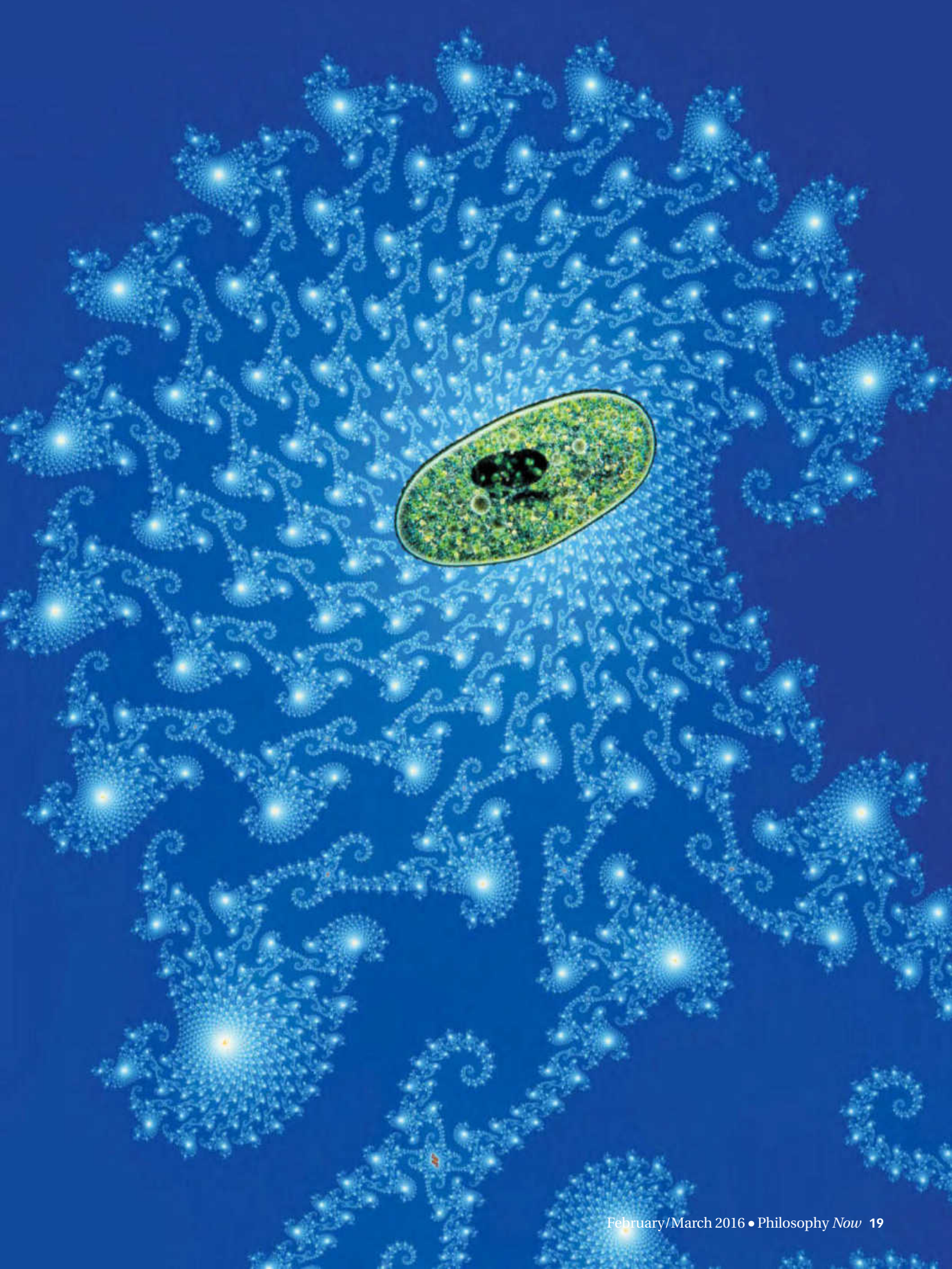
Leibniz’s understanding of organism would be echoed many years later by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger in the final section of his famous 1944 essay, *What is Life?*, which addressed ‘The Relation between Clockwork and Organism’:

“It needs no poetic imagination but only clear and sober scientific reflection to recognize that we are here obviously faced with events whose regular and lawful unfolding is guided by a ‘mechanism’... producing events which are a paragon of orderliness. Whether we find it astonishing or whether we find it quite plausible that a small but highly organized group of atoms be capable of acting in this manner, the situation is unprecedented; it is unknown anywhere else except in living matter.”

© AUDREY BOROWSKI 2016

Audrey Borowski graduated from Oxford and is doing a PhD in the History of Ideas. She’s interested in the history of linguistic thought.





Herder & Human Identity

Brian King says that to understand the herd, you need a Herder.

One question about human nature is whether it is the same for all people at all times, or whether it is fundamentally different in different cultures or historical periods. The argument that it is everywhere the same is implicit in the evolutionary view, since we all share common ancestors; but it has a longer pedigree than that. Plato's account of the soul assumes that it applies to all men; Hume believed that "mankind is so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange"; and the philosophers of the Enlightenment tended to see human truths in universal terms because they felt that the most significant aspect of human nature was rationality, which they observed to be evenly distributed throughout the world. However other thinkers, such as German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) thought that peoples from different historical periods and cultures vary so much in their concepts and beliefs that human nature is radically different in different cultures.

This idea originates from two basic observations. The first is that the need to belong to a group is as basic a need in humans as the need for food. Herder adapts Aristotle's idea that man is a political animal, and takes it as a natural law that man is by destiny a creature of the herd, of society. And that, for Herder, is about it as regards any universal nature man has. The second basic view of Herder's is that man's values and sense of himself are passed on culturally, specifically by language.

Personal Development

In his *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1772), Herder claims that the difference between humans and animals lies in the finality of purpose in animals and the developmental nature of purpose in man. "The bee was a bee as soon as it built its first cell," he wrote, "but a person was not human until he had achieved completeness. People continued to grow as long as they lived... We are always in process, unsettled, unsatisfied. The essence of our life is never satisfaction, rather always progression, and we have never been human until we have lived to the end."

So according to Herder, we are always moving towards our true nature: our nature is a kind of project for us to fulfil. This seems to imply that your development and growth as a person is something that continues, or should continue, throughout your life. (A similar sentiment is echoed by Bob Dylan when he sings "He not busy being born is busy dying" in 'It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding'). Herder, then, is saying that we have no set human nature except in so far as we are social creatures.

A critic might respond that this simply means that we are always unsatisfied. But Herder is no existentialist, advocating that we should each individualistically fulfil our own destiny. Instead he argues that our movement towards becoming who we are, our identity, is largely determined by our cultural environment and the shared language that conveys that culture's

values to us. Becoming someone is principally (but not only) a collectivist thing; as Kwame Appiah says, "the individual identity... is likely to have what Herder would have seen as a national identity as a component of its collective dimension" (*The Ethics of Identity*, 2005). So although Herder does see that each person has an original way of being human and that he ought to be true to himself (a basic existentialist idea), he also sees that an essential part of a person's identity is handed down to him through his culture, and is therefore not a matter of choice.

For Herder, each nation is separate, distinguished by climate, education, custom, tradition, and heredity. He claims that Providence "wonderfully separated nationalities not only by woods and mountains, seas and deserts, rivers and climates, but more particularly by languages, inclinations and characters." He emphasized the importance of national culture in the formation of one's identity and nature by saying, "he that has lost his patriotic spirit has lost himself and the whole world about himself" whilst teaching that "in a certain sense every human perfection is national."

So for Herder, becoming someone involves a person growing and learning to fully identify with his or her culture and values. That is a large part of a person's 'true' nature. He attaches great importance to culture and also national identity, as transmitted through language – that most basic and essential of all human capacities.

The process of passing on values occurs in families at first. By teaching children language, a family's manner of thinking and set of values are developed and preserved in them. Then values are passed on through larger units such as schools, and eventually through societies or nations, the largest units that identify with the language. Each community or nation has its own language, unique tradition and history, which shapes the lives and values, the art and ideas, the activities and leisure pursuits of its inhabitants – its culture – and makes them the people they are – gives them their identity.

To a certain extent Herder is anticipating the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language determines thought and behaviour. In 1929 Edward Sapir said, "The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." (From a 1929 article entitled 'The Status of Linguistics as a Science' in *Language* Vol 5, No 4). This 'mould theory' of language does not just say that our thoughts are determined by our language, but that our very culture, values and ways of perceiving the world are moulded by the language in which we learn them, and that our ability to think outside the culture is therefore limited, if

Johann Gottfried von Herder
(portrait by Darren McAndrew, 2016)



not impossible. Herder would have agreed: for him, our nature and identity are acquired through learning our values as expressed to us through language.

Herder's *Neusprach*

Many would see as dangerous the notion that language use and the attendant culture determine one's values and limit effective criticism of the culture, since this appears to be a recipe for totalitarian success.

Many regimes throughout history have attempted to mould peoples' values and identities through their cultures, with various degrees of success – the medieval Catholic Church and the communist regimes of the Twentieth Century are arguably instances of this. Some might also argue that contemporary Western society's insistence on liberal individualism and its materialism is also a more subtle version; after all, advertising is not just promoting a product but a way of life and a set of values that attend that way of life.

In his novel *1984*, George Orwell portrayed a totalitarian society that controlled language itself. The Party promotes a specially invented, highly restricted language called 'Newspeak', which was founded on the idea that if there are no words for a concept it cannot be thought. Hence words like 'freedom' were omitted from its vocabulary, to make the idea unthinkable, so that people were less likely to make 'unreasonable' demands and rebel. Similarly words like 'thoughtcrime' were introduced to make this concept appear real and threatening.

Orwell writes the following in his 'Principles of Newspeak' appendix to *1984*:

"The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the worldview and mental habits proper... but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of [the Party's worldview] – should be literally unthinkable... [Newspeak's] vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meaning whatever... Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum."

The question presented here is how far our ability to think is dependent on the extent of our vocabulary. Are less well educated people easier to be made to conform? Can regimes manipulate peoples' values so thoroughly, or does something more basic come through to undermine its attempts? And, if so, where do these more basic values come from, if not from culture and language? Is there something in our human nature that's more fundamental?

Universality versus Relativity

There are further counterpoints to Herder's view to consider. If cultures alone generate values and tastes, how can Western people like, say, Chinese art, when they have not been

brought up in that tradition? Similarly, why are certain cultural items, such as songs, sports, or films, popular across a wide variety of cultures? What does this imply about cultural values?

It could be argued that Herder is exaggerating the differences between cultures. Two observations serve to show that there is a great deal of shared values throughout the world. One is that we have international events, such as music festivals or football tournaments, where common values or perhaps even universal values are clearly shared; the other is that study of ancient civilisations (for instance, the over 4,000-year-old Sumerian civilisation) reveal people having very similar concerns and values as our own.

Herder's view is a cultural relativist one in that he maintains that since each culture originates its values, it can only be judged on its own terms. And since there are no external, objective, universal values by which anyone can judge a culture, one culture is as 'valid' as any other. His cultural relativist position is confirmed by the following statement: "every nation bears in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independent of all comparison with that of others" for "do not nationalities differ in everything, in poetry, in appearance, in tastes, in usages, customs and languages?" As he says, "each nationality contains its centre of happiness within itself, as a bullet the centre of gravity." So each society is self-contained as regards its values; one society cannot be 'superior' to another and, by implication, one society cannot through time progress to being a 'better' one. Herder condemns those who would judge another culture by some alleged universal standard by saying, "the savage who loves himself, his wife and child with quiet joy and glows with joy at the limited activity of his tribe as for his own life, is in my opinion a more real being than that cultivated shadow who is enraptured with the shadow of the whole species."

'True' people therefore are not completely self-created (as many existentialists would say) but are mainly the products of tradition and custom. So, the intellectual who tries to see things from the perspective of universal truths and is critical of their own society's customs and traditions (Herder was attacking the Enlightenment philosophers here) is less 'real' than someone who is brought up in the narrow conventions of his society and just accepts and values what his family and society have told him to. What we would nowadays call philosophers would not fully be people, according to Herder!

Conclusion

In a way, Herder is turning Plato on his head by saying that the ordinary uncritical man is more fully human than the philosopher: that the man who stays in Plato's famous Cave of illusion is more fully human than the one who tries to escape. Herder was one of the first to see the ordinary man as something more than just 'the rabble' or 'the mob'. However, his praise of the dignity of a nation's common people ('*das Volk*') was a forerunner of Twentieth Century perversions of that idea, which in the name of the state attempted to produce mass 'democracies' of mob rule, as the Nazis did.

© BRIAN KING 2016

Brian King is a retired Philosophy and History teacher. He has published an ebook, Arguing About Philosophy, and now runs adult Philosophy and History groups via the University of the Third Age.

How Nietzsche Inspired Dali

Magdalena Scholle looks for Apollonian and Dionysian traits in Salvador Dali's art.

"Even in the matter of moustaches I was going to surpass Nietzsche! Mine would not be depressing, catastrophic, burdened by Wagnerian music and mist. No! It would be line-thin, imperialistic, ultra-rationalistic, and pointing towards heaven, like the vertical mysticism, like the vertical Spanish syndicates." Salvador Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, 1963, p.17

"Yes, it is in the Spanish manner that I always sign my mad games! With blood, the way Nietzsche wanted it!" *Diary of a Genius*, p.40

Friedrich Nietzsche was undoubtedly one of the most controversial and influential philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among his many works, his first, *The Birth of Tragedy* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 1872), deserves the special attention of art critics, because here the German philosopher introduced the concept that two opposing forces, the Apollonian and Dionysian, inspire all artistic creation. The dichotomy proposed by Nietzsche here is an attempt to interpret the world in two ways and also indicates the existence of two different concepts of truth and morality: absolute and relative.

Nietzsche's books were read and commented upon by famous writers, philosophers and artists. In particular, the Catalan Surrealist painter, Salvador Dalí, was familiar with his most prominent works. Reading Dalí's *Diary of a Genius*, we can see that he knew the contents of *The Birth of Tragedy* very well. The fact that here Dalí repeatedly refers both to Nietzsche's philosophy generally and to his concept of art in particular, shows that the artist was heavily inspired by Nietzschean ideas. I wish to explore this influence in this article.

Nietzsche's Two Spirits of Art

"The continuous evolution of art is bound up with the duality of the Apolline and the Dionysiac in much the same way as reproduction depends on there being two sexes." *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.14



The Belvedere Apollo

According to Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, art is a product of the dynamic conflict between two elements at work in culture: the Dionysian and Apollonian. He drew these terms from the names of the two gods from the Greek pantheon. It is worth noting that in the Greek tradition, Dionysus and Apollo were not considered enemies or opposing forces. But Nietzsche perceived a contrary nature in them – which seems reasonable, because these two gods embodied almost opposite personality types. Apollo was the god of

poetry, art, music, and medicine, light and order, and in general, the harmony of the world. He was considered a symbol of perfect beauty, self-control, progress, balance, peace, rationality, logical thinking, moderation, and behavior in accordance with designated rules. The Apollonian attitude is well expressed by the maxims of the Delphic Oracle: 'Obey the law'; 'Think as a mortal'; 'Control yourself'; 'Control anger'; 'Cling to discipline'; 'Control the eye'; 'Pursue harmony'. In contrast, Dionysus was the god of wild nature, the patron of virile and fertile forces, a symbol of a rakish lifestyle, wine, religious ecstasy, absurdity, emotions, passion, vitality, instincts, and irrationality. To Nietzsche he represents a dynamic life-giving power that breaks all the barriers and limitations established by the law, and breaks down all harmony.

Nietzsche pointed out that by following the Apollonian current in art, an artist surrenders to generally-accepted artistic principles – that is, he or she seeks to illustrate beauty and excellence through the standard formulas of the culture, and in this way, the artist is trying to beautify or idealise reality. Nietzsche was in no doubt that if an artist chooses such a conformist attitude, they depart from true nature, and even *oppose* reality: and the Apollonian perspective is not only against nature, it is against life and all its true manifestations. According to Nietzsche, a continual state of balance, moderation, simplicity, and order, is an illusory, fictitious vision of the world. In his view the principles of harmony, order, and perfect symmetry never dominate in nature, which is always chaotic, disordered, and variable. The desire for continual harmony comes from weakness and from a fear of real life.

Nietzsche's concept of art is closely associated with his philosophy of life. Nietzsche often stressed that human life itself is the highest good. It is moreover a *biological* fact, because man is a corporeal being. Spiritual life is only an offshoot of bodily life, and a 'disembodied' spirituality is merely a place of refuge for the weak. Weak people need morality, inhibitions, and laws because they are not strong enough to live in the fullness of life.

On the other hand, Nietzsche noted that the human mind is unable to grasp an ever-changing reality, because reality is not a system. So man tries to impose a framework on reality in order to organize, generalize, simplify, and inhibit nature. These actions produce a picture of reality that is manageable, but somewhat distorted.

Nietzsche accordingly believed that the artist should not be afraid to shatter this scheme of organization. Instead, the artist should stand beyond limitations and moral



Michelangelo's Bacchus (Dionysus)

schemas, should eschew the desire to escape into ideals, and should open him- or herself up to the power and dynamics of life. Nietzsche repeatedly emphasized that life's true essence is devoid of rules and restrictions, and that this is the first and absolute truth for existence (instead of God or morality, for example). Thus the Dionysian attitude seems consistent with Nietzsche's concept of nature. The Dionysian understanding is that the world "is beyond definition, or limitation." The drunken worshippers of Dionysus are united with the energy of the turbulent flow of life. An artist following the Dionysian path, which is characterized by unbounded creativity, will not be afraid to push the boundaries of morality or cultural norms, and will instead follow the voice of his or her nature and impulses, which may oppose the prevailing rules, laws and conventions. Dionysian art is characteristically affirmative, dominant, irrational, and full of dynamism and internal tensions. It confirms the value of unfiltered natural impulses. It does not naïvely see the world through rose-tinted glasses. Rather, it accepts the shape of life as it is, and agrees to be bound by unknown fate. Enchantment with life, a sense of the magnificence of life, and the joy of life, are also typical, and address the need to be reconciled with the transience and fragility of human life, and the arbitrariness of catastrophe. We can say that art of a Dionysian nature genuinely speaks life's voice. Or as a reviewer of Picasso on the website *kunstpedia.com* vividly puts it, the Dionysian "represents the unvarnished truth at the heart of existence: a 'storm' that destroys all polarity and antitheses and reveals the primordial unity at the heart of earthly existence."

Certainly Nietzsche understood life dynamically. He believed that a person must know not only how to survive, but also how to develop in life. He advocated an attitude of conscious affirmation, breaking the resistance of the world, and sensing the growth of one's own power. To him a person should accept reality as it is in the current moment, and experience it as best he or she can. He also had no doubt that art can influence the destiny of people. It can ennoble them, it can be a remedy for or respite from the nuisances of life, and it can help one reconcile with the drama of human existence, and with one's fate. By practicing art we can transform the world, or participate in the process of its re-creation. In this sense, art can have a definite impact both on our lives and on the history of the world.

This is actually possible in either a Dionysian or an Apollonian way. To choose the Apollonian path is to cultivate the desire to create a perfect world, with ideal forms and classical beauty. To choose the Dionysian path is to cultivate a triumphant affirmation of life as it is, recognizing and accepting all of life, including its horrors and its darkest aspects. Although Nietzsche especially valued the Dionysian attitude, seeing in it the source of everything powerful and creative, he claimed that the highest product of society is the creative genius who miraculously merges Dionysian and Apollonian values. So although the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits seem to be in opposition to each other, their cooperation is possible. For instance, he noted that the Greeks loved beauty and admired the perfection of form, but that in this love there also lay an overflowing, formless stream of instincts, impulses and passions. And accord-

ing to Nietzsche, the Apollonian and Dionysian were paired in that archetype of brilliant art, Athenian tragedy – hence the title of his first book.

For Nietzsche, the genius, the exceptional artist, would be someone who rises above mediocrity by following the strengths of life, as well as by utilising ideas of harmony and beauty. They would not be afraid to break the existing stereotypes, and would not fear to be dangerous to the existing culture. With this in mind, we can ask, did Salvador Dalí, this artist from Figueres, live up to the challenge of genius?

Dalí the Nietzschean Genius?

"The Nietzschean Dionysus accompanied me everywhere like a patient governess." *Diary of a Genius*, p.21.

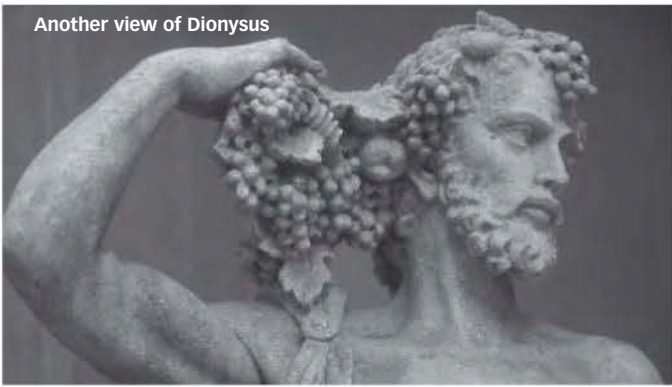
"Since Dionysius the Areopagite, nobody in the West, neither Leonardo da Vinci nor Paracelsus, nor Goethe nor Nietzsche, has been in deeper communion with the cosmos than Dalí. To grant man access to the creative process, to nourish cosmic and social life – that is the role of the artist" Georges Mathieu, from a letter reprinted in *Diary of a Genius*, p.171.

In the world of philosophy Nietzsche was considered a maverick, and he tragically ended up insane. Similarly, in the world of art, Salvador Dalí was seen as a problematic artist, and an eccentric.



A 1998 *Philosophy Now* cover featuring Dalí's *The Disintegration of The Persistence of Memory* (1954)

Another view of Dionysus



Dalí repeatedly refers to Nietzsche's works in his *Diary of a Genius*. No doubt every reader of it will gain the impression that the Catalan artist was fascinated by the philosophy of Nietzsche and with his character. He even grew his mustache to show his connection with the German philosopher (see the quote at the beginning of this article).

In his *Diary*, Dalí emphasizes that Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1881) drove him to atheism and the rejection of Christian virtues, and contributed to the development of his anti-social instinct and lack of family feeling. Apparently, for Dalí, the four years before his exclusion from his family were a state of extreme 'spiritual subversion': "To me those years were truly Nietzschean" (p.18). Dalí's admiration of Nietzschean philosophy was so great that he called himself "the Nietzsche of the irrational" (p.23). It is also worth noting that the title of his diary suggests that the artist not only *aspired* to be a genius according to the German philosopher's definition, but felt that he actually *was* one: "Some day... people will be forced to take an interest in my work" (p.43) or "My brain becomes normal again though I am still a genius" (p.186).

However, it is difficult to precisely pin down what Dalí wanted to suggest in claiming a connection with Nietzsche. Did he really appropriate Nietzsche's philosophy? Or rather, did the artist behave abnormally because he wanted excitement and wide publicity? Did he make himself out to be a madman and weirdo only for financial reasons, rather than out of philosophical agreement over an innate Dionysian impulse?

Regardless of how these questions are answered, Nietzsche's thoughts and ideas do seem to fit well with the basic ideas of Surrealism, the art movement to which the Spanish artist belonged and loved most. One of the main ideas of Surrealism is the visual expression of internal perceptions. Artists of this style are also trying to create images that disturb the logical sense of reality. Since they cross the borderline between consciousness and dream, fantasy, or hallucination, their visions are often grotesque, and a complete move away from rationality.

In viewing Dalí's paintings and sculptures, we can see that we are participating in thought experiments with the artist. His strange works are clearly opposed to realism, and full of dream-like landscapes and deformities. There are erotic, even lustful, threads. In his works we also often perceive an exaltation of the demonic: destruction, deformity, ugliness. There are themes of revolution, brutality, violence, cruelty, sexual perversion, and subversion. There is no doubt that the art of Salvador Dalí departs from the classical idea of beauty. In this sense, we can say that Dalí moved away from academic art, which is usually

rooted in the Apollonian camp, since it refers to the human desire for order and rationality, and into the Dionysian. As Dalí wrote, "That was the great lesson taught by ancient Greece, a lesson, that I believe was first revealed to us by Friedrich Nietzsche. Because if it is true that Apollonian spirit in Greece reached the highest universal level, it is even more true that the Dionysian spirit surpassed all excess and all outrage" (p.102). Certainly Dalí was a master of Surrealism and a follower of the Dionysian attitudes: "Before my life was to become what it is now, an example of asceticism and virtue, I wanted to cling to my illusory surrealism of a polymorphous pervert, if only for three more minutes, like the sleeper who struggles to retain the last fragments of a Dionysian dream" (p.21).

Dalí developed his own unique way of perceiving the world, which he described as 'the paranoid-critical revolution'. This, he claimed, was a spontaneous way of generating irrational knowledge based upon the interpretive association of delirious phenomena. Yet his method explicitly refers to both the main ideas of Surrealism, and to the Nietzschean concept of Dionysian art. However, although Dalí clearly admired Nietzsche's ideas, one cannot assume that he uncritically accepted every thought of the German philosopher. For instance, he did not like it that Nietzsche's concepts were contaminated by 'romantic irrationalism': "I, the obsessed rationalist, was the only one who knew what I wanted: I was not going to submit to irrationality for its own sake, to the narcissistic and passive irrationality the others practiced; I would do completely the opposite, I would fight for the 'conquest of the irrational'. In the meantime my friends were to let themselves be overwhelmed by the irrational, were to succumb, like so many others – Nietzsche included – to that romantic weakness" (p.19). It may be recalled that Dalí grew a mustache to be similar to Nietzsche, but wanting to be differentiated from him, he grew it into a different shape: "The important thing remains that my anti-Nietzschean moustache is still pointing to heaven like the spires of Bourgos cathedral" (p.43).

Dalí was convinced that the weaknesses of Nietzsche's ideas were related to his mental illness. The artist also seemed concerned that he too would be suspected of some mental infirmity. As we know, the line between mental illness and artistic creativity is very thin. We can see that Dalí knew that as well, because, as he noted in his diary, Nietzsche "was a weakling who had been feckless enough to go mad, when it is essential in this world, not to go mad!... The only difference between a madman and myself is that I am not mad!" (p.17).

Through his art Dalí showed that the chaos and tension of Dionysus can always invade the sanity and order of Apollo, that beauty can always be impaired by disproportion, and that the rational understanding of emotion can be impaired by instinct, or even madness. In this way, Dalí embodies Nietzsche's belief that the highest achievement of art is found in a synthesis of, or at least an encounter between, its Dionysian and Apollonian elements.

© DR MAGDALENA SCHOLLE 2016

Magdalena Scholle is pursuing postdoctoral research at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. She has a strong interest in the thinking of Aelred of Rievaulx and, as Magdalene Czubak, has published several books and articles on him.

Justifying Our Moral Judgments

Thomas Dabay combines the ideas of David Hume and Immanuel Kant to help show how we can be right about what's right.

How ought we to justify our moral judgments? To take a concrete case, consider the fact that throughout much of the Western world, poor and ethnic minority children are significantly less likely than their richer white counterparts to receive a satisfactory education. Although we can make some judgments about this fact in purely *descriptive* terms – perhaps judging it to be an inefficiency in the education system – we also make judgments about it in *prescriptive* terms. In particular, we might judge that there *ought not* be this sort of educational inequality; that it is *morally wrong* that there is. But what makes us think that we are right in making such a judgment?

When asked this sort of question people often employ one of two strategies of thought. On the one hand, Amy might find it *intuitively* shameful for such things to happen, especially in a country with a virulent history of racial discrimination such as the United States. On the other hand, Betty might believe in *principles* that engender a duty to promote human flourishing, and education is a key contributor to such flourishing. Such appeals either to moral intuitions or to principles seem to be common strategies, ones that philosophers and non-philosophers alike use to try to justify their moral judgments. After considering each approach in isolation, I will argue that only a mixed strategy that appeals to both intuitions and principles is adequate for justifying our moral judgments.

Intuitions

To help focus our discussion of intuitions, I will concentrate on one prominent ethical tradition, which has grown out of the work of the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76). According to Hume, we are the sorts of beings who have gut-level feelings of approval or disapproval when considering certain states of affairs. When we think about children being denied education, for instance, we are liable to feel disgust or shame. Alternatively, when we see a child having fun, we are likely to feel joy or satisfaction. Hume called these feelings ‘sentiments’.

Sentiments are important for our present discussion because we seem to experience them with the directness and immediacy of an intuition. Additionally, certain sentiments seem to have an intrinsic moral attractiveness. Consider rage and joy: the latter is a sentiment that, all things being equal, we ought to promote, whereas we ought not to promote the former. Hume’s thought was that we can justify our moral judgments about a state of affairs through the morally-charged sentiments we feel in reaction to that state of affairs (and his friend Adam Smith wrote a famous essay on similar lines, called *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.)

One obvious worry this thought provokes is that people don’t always have what we might think to be appropriate sentiments in given situations. There are people who feel joy in the face of other people’s pain, yet we don’t want to say that these

sentiments ought to justify their moral judgments. Hume anticipates this worry, reassuring us that in general it is part of human nature to empathize with others. But this empathy is not simply one sentiment among all the others, because empathy is not a *sentiment* at all. Rather, empathy is a capacity or tendency to feel another person’s sentiments. Hume thought this was the result of a special sense; Smith thought it worked by a psychological process of mirroring: in imagining the pain (for instance) of another person, we feel some of that pain in ourselves and therefore, naturally, we want to alleviate it.

However, this response only goes so far. Consider again the example of educational inequality. A short fifty years ago, empathy failed to produce, in many white Americans, appropriately negative sentiments in reaction to the injustice of segregated, inferior schools for black American children, and the reasons are not hard to identify. At the very least, segregation itself may have prevented white Americans from experiencing at first hand the misfortune of those afflicted by educational inequality, leaving empathy little opportunity to correct their inappropriate sentiments. More problematically, the inequality itself showed that many people had inappropriate sentiments. Empathizing with one another would strengthen the popularity and intensity of these inappropriate sentiments. For these reasons, sentiment by itself would seem to be inadequate for justifying moral judgments.

Principles

Since the Humean intuitionist approach has these problems, let’s turn to the second strategy for justifying moral judgments: appealing to principles. Again, to focus our discussion, I will concentrate on a prominent tradition in ethics, this time associated with German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

According to Kant, reason provides us with a test for identifying good moral principles. The first step of this test is to recognize what our plan of action is in a particular circumstance. For instance, consider the case where you have grown fed up with your job and are looking for a new one. You eventually get an interview, but unfortunately it will take place during work hours. To attend the interview you will need to take the day off from your current job, but you know that your boss will not give it to you if you tell her the real reason you want time off. With this in mind, you think it would be a lot easier on both you and your boss if you just fibbed and told her that you’re feeling sick and won’t make it to work that day.

An honest appraisal of your plan of action here is that you are planning to lie to your boss. Once you identify this plan, the Kantian claim is that reason provides a standard by which you can judge its moral character. To construct this standard, you need only ask one simple question: ‘What if everyone acted according to my plan of action?’ If the situation you describe in answer to this question is consistent, then you can justifiably believe that the action you plan to perform is morally permissi-

ble. Otherwise, you ought to conclude that your planned action is impermissible, and therefore it would be wrong to perform it. Returning to our example, after identifying your plan to lie, you must ask yourself, ‘What if everyone lied?’ It doesn’t take much imagination to realize that the purpose of lying is to deceive; and yet if everyone lied, no one would be deceived because everyone would expect everyone else to lie. According to Kant, this sort of inconsistency between the purpose of your plan in lying and its universal results provides justification for the moral judgment that lying is wrong.

This, however, is only half of the Kantian story. Even if Kant’s test identifies apparently good moral principles, we must also ask to whom these principles apply. For Kant, such principles apply to all moral agents; doubly so here, in that every moral agent ought to tell the truth to every other moral agent. However, this response depends on people recognizing moral agents as moral agents. If we return to the educational inequality example, we see that this introduces a stumbling block. Thus although most rich white humans nowadays recognize that poor or non-white humans are full moral agents, this hasn’t always been the case. Until not very long ago, across the Western world the need to justify slavery and racial oppression tempted whites to think of blacks as being not fully rational – not fully human – and so not fully moral agents. So although racists could recognize that a person is being harmed when they do not receive a good education, and that harming a person is wrong, they wouldn’t recognize the black victims of educational inequality as *being* full persons, and so worthy of ethical consideration. Instead, they would wrongly see these victims as having the moral status of, say, non-human animals, and on this basis many whites could justify their inappropriate moral judgment here to themselves and their peers.

Equilibrium

At this point we should be able to diagnose the problem both the Kantian and Humean strategies face when taken in isolation: on their own, either strategy leaves us with a problematically static system for justifying moral judgments. That is, the problem is that once some moral judgment has become widely accepted in society, neither strategy offers a mechanism for critiquing it. With Kant’s strategy this is because social conditions may prevent people from recognizing other individuals as full moral agents, while with Hume’s strategy, it’s because social conditions may isolate people from the bigger picture and so inappropriately skew their feelings. My suggestion is that we can address these issues and come up with an adequate way of justifying our moral judgments by using each strategy to supplement the other.

The key thought behind this joint strategy is that we have to start where we find ourselves, but that we ought not stay where we start. So if we find ourselves with strong empathetic sentiments, we should start by taking them at face value, but we should quickly ask ourselves in a Kantian manner what we would think if we had these sentiments for everyone. In the educational inequality case, people who feel neutral or positive sentiments when considering poor or minority students receiving a bad education are unlikely to feel comfortable about having those same sentiments in relation to rich white people



De-segregating education, 1960: US Marshals sent to ensure her safety in the face of protests escort 6 year old Ruby Bridges home from her school.

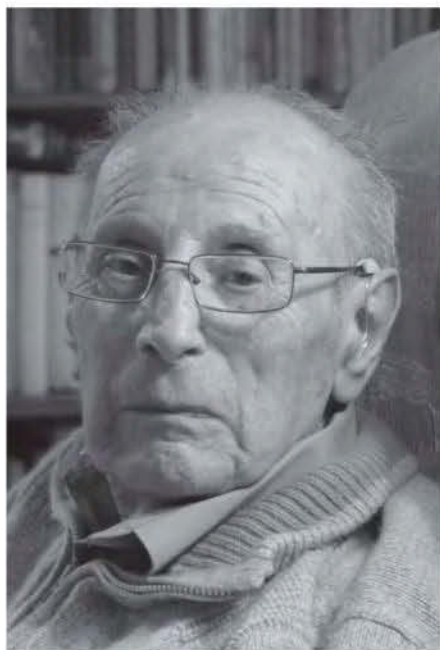
like themselves receiving a bad education. This inconsistency in their sentiments should tell them that their original sentiments are misguided, and that there is most likely a moral principle they are not appreciating. So by this mechanism, people can ‘ascend’ from moral sentiments to moral principles, introducing a dynamic corrective component to Hume’s strategy.

Alternatively, if we find ourselves strongly supporting certain moral principles, we should take them at face value to begin with, but from there, we should start to imagine the sorts of empathetical sentiments they evoke in their wider application. For example, if our principle is that only certain humans – rich white males – have a right to good education, we generally won’t feel any mixed sentiments when we imagine all the inanimate objects or non-human animals that we do not educate. However, imagining the lower quality of life that poor and minority students will have because of their lack of education should introduce mixed sentiments even in someone with class-based or racist preconceptions. By recognizing these more mixed sentiments, people can come to better recognize the moral status of people that they have been ignoring, and upgrade their moral principles. In this way, Kant’s strategy of universalizing principles can be supplemented so that people can ‘descend’ from moral principles to moral sentiments in order to identify the proper scope of their principles.

By combining these two corrective mechanisms together we engage in a process that the American philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) called ‘reflective equilibrium’, although I prefer the phrase ‘sound common sense’. Depending on our starting position, we either rationally reflect on our sentiments or empathetically reflect on our principles, and make changes where need be. From there, we will then find ourselves in a new moral starting position, and the onus is on us to *continue* rationally and empathetically reflecting. Only then are we doing everything we can to justify our moral judgments, and only then can we continue to grow as moral beings.

© THOMAS DABAY 2016

Thomas Dabay is taking a PhD in Philosophy at Vanderbilt University.



D.D. Raphael

The moral and political philosopher D.D. (David Daiches) Raphael died just before Christmas – a month short of his 100th birthday. Shortly before his death, he spoke to **Gideon Calder** about what more than eighty years in philosophy involves.

What led you to study philosophy?

I remember reading a book in the early 1930s – now what was the book? Perhaps it was *Ethics* by G.E. Moore – and thinking, “Well, if that’s philosophy, I think I can do it!”

One striking thing about your work is your consistent interest in British philosophers.

Well, it just so happened that I knew French reasonably well, but not so well as to be able to do philosophical work in French. I remember while going to lectures at Oxford that Henry Price, who was the Professor of Logic, suggested that I should read [18th century Welsh moral philosopher] Richard Price. And while reading it, I again thought “If that’s philosophy, I think I can do it!”

And your DPhil thesis was partly on Price.

The thing is, I went to Oxford, to University College, because another boy from my school had done that, and had done very well. I went as a classical scholar. It was a four-year course, with Classical Moderations for the first five terms and then *Literae Humaniores* (“Greats”) after another seven. Then Henry Price suggested that I should edit an edition of Richard Price’s book *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (1758). I think he was interested partly because they had the same surname! And he knew that Price needed to be edited.

You must have spent more than eighty years in and around universities. After completing your DPhil in 1940, you went to New Zealand as your first full academic post, to teach at the University of Otago.

Yes, that was after working in the Ministry of Labour during the war. I liked New Zealand and enjoyed the times there. But I regretted the move in some ways as my wife wasn’t happy, and her father was ill. I was originally supposed to go for five years but we decided to come back after three years. In consequence I had to pay for the fare, which otherwise would have been covered by the institution.

So you had to buy yourself out of the post, as it were. And on returning to the UK, you took up a post at the University of Glasgow?
Yes. I had known Professor MacLagan

there, because when I was a graduate student at Oriel College [Oxford], MacLagan was the regular philosophy teacher there. I got to know him well, and thought a great deal of him, as I still do.

And you were then in the same department in which Adam Smith had been Professor of Moral Philosophy.

Yes, though that’s not why I took the post!

You were in Glasgow for over twenty years.

Yes, ten years as lecturer, then senior lecturer, with MacLagan as Professor of Moral Philosophy. Then I was appointed Professor of Political Philosophy.

Then you moved to Reading University.

Yes, though that was a mistake; I should have stayed in Glasgow. After that I went to Imperial College [in London].

Which is primarily associated with the sciences, as an institution. So how come they sought a political philosopher?

They wanted somebody to deal with the non-scientific subjects – with the humanities – teaching them to science students. So I put in for it, and was very glad when I was appointed. I was very happy there.

What was it that you enjoyed about it?

Well, the students were very clever – pretty well all the students at Imperial College are clever. And they were interested in philosophy, as being quite different from their scientific curricula. So the students who came were keen. Eventually I was made an honorary Fellow there. I have a soft spot for the place.

Do you think the academic world changed a great deal around you? Was it a different world to be in by the time you retired?

I wouldn’t say that it had changed, no.

I’ve a particular interest in Adam Smith as a philosopher – though most people of course know him primarily as an economist. Could you say a little bit about your reasons for devoting attention to his work?

Well, it having been suggested to me that I should edit Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), I came to appreciate him for that. I know he was not a great philosopher, but I found him attractive.



Do you think he ranks alongside figures such as David Hume?

Not as a philosopher – Hume was a much greater philosopher. But they were friends, of course. I was interested in the Scottish Enlightenment in general, and I came to have a respect and an affection for Smith, and for Hume.

What is it that makes the Scottish Enlightenment quite distinct from its German and French counterparts, would you say?

The fact that it's close to common sense, I suppose. This also made it intelligible. I didn't care for philosophy that was difficult to understand. I was attracted to Scottish philosophy because of its clarity.

When you read somebody like Kant, regardless of your native tongue, you have to take on a different lexicon, and a kind of system. Reading Hume or Reid, you don't have to do that in the same kind of way. It's not that their work is any less sophisticated or subtle. It's just that it's written in a different mode. Many people will know you primarily for Problems of Political Philosophy, which first came out in 1970. Did you feel that it

was influential on how people understood what political philosophy is?

I think so in a small way, yes.

Your more recent book Concepts of Justice (2003) introduces a series of thinkers and the ways in which they approach the idea of justice. Most political philosophy courses these days have a heavy emphasis on John Rawls and his A Theory of Justice, but in your book, he features just as the subject of one chapter, no longer than that on anyone else. Do you think it would be helpful if political philosophers didn't dwell so much on Rawls?

Oh, I don't know. I think he's interesting and stimulating, so I'm quite happy that it should be so.

What really stands out in your approach is your heavy stress on the priority of clarifying concepts. Do you think there are limitations to that? How far does it take us?

I think it takes us a long way on its own. It's illuminating and enlightening. One understands things better.

Should we bring the analysis of concepts closer to the real world of politics, that is, to

our understanding of the ways in which power actually works?

Well I suppose that the pure, conceptual side is just what interested me, and I found I could get students to be equally interested. But I don't think it's the only way to do it. I've no objection to working backwards from challenges that confront us in the real world. It just wasn't what appealed to me.

Do you miss teaching?

Yes. If you see that you're making a difference, that's very pleasing. Some of my students have gone on to do good things. Mostly teaching philosophy!

Are there colleagues over the years to whom you feel especially indebted?

I owed a great deal to my brother-in-law, [literary historian and critic] David Daiches. I admired what he had done – he had made a difference to his subject area. And I was very fond of him.

Have there been contemporary philosophers who have particularly influenced you?

[English moral philosopher Harold Arthur] Prichard influenced me a lot.

I'm interested in what you think your biggest achievements have been. Of what are you proudest?

Oh dear! I don't think I've achieved anything much! I think the fact that I've made a difference to students – that's pleasing.

Do you have a favourite book?

Now I did think about this. *Alice in Wonderland*.

A fine favourite to have! Though I was thinking of your own work – whether there's a book which you would most like to be held up as an example of what you have done.

I don't think so, no. [Later DDR recalled that *Moral Judgement* is a favourite.]

Are you proud of all your work?

I wouldn't say 'proud'. I'm glad to have done it. Knowing that it's well used by people – I'm pleased to have done that.

• Gideon Calder took his PhD at Cardiff University and is now Professor of Social Ethics at the University of South Wales.



The caterpillar gets philosophical in *Alice in Wonderland*

Why Self-Interest Makes Relationships Valuable

Daniel Tippens argues that our self-interestedness has a positive side after all.

In Socrates' culture of Fourth Century BCE Athens, if someone awaiting execution was actually executed, it could look pretty bad for his friends. It could look like they hadn't tried hard enough to save him.

In Plato's dialogue *Crito*, Socrates has been imprisoned and does await his execution. As expected, Socrates' wealthy friend Crito goes to see him to inform him that arrangements have been made to smuggle him out. However, Socrates refuses Crito's assistance to escape, on the grounds that if he were to evade his sentence he would be violating his tacit agreement with the state to abide by its laws and penalties, which would render his escape unjust. Instead, Socrates decides he must stay and receive his punishment. So Socrates was executed, and Crito was left to face the social repercussions.

Most discussions about this dialogue revolve around what just actions are and whether or not Socrates' death was just. But when I first heard this story, I was curious about two other things. First, was Crito's attempt to break Socrates out of prison driven primarily by the self-interested desire to uphold his reputation? Second, if Socrates believed that Crito was acting primarily out of self-interest, how would this make him feel?

We sometimes find ourselves, or see others, in situations at least somewhat analogous to the one I ascribed to Crito. We see doctors prescribing ineffective or overpriced drugs in order to stay on some pharmaceutical company's payroll; or we see people networking – that is, appearing to help others in order to advance their own career. We even have the expression 'nothing in life is free', capturing the belief that nobody is ever going to do something just to improve your well-being – they will at best only appear to do so. Perhaps most actions people perform are ultimately self-interested.

In this article I would like to highlight the bright side of believing that most of peoples' actions are self-interested. To be more specific, I think that believing that most actions are not driven by purely altruistic desires has a bright side to it: that this fact makes true friendships and

loving relationships much more valuable. If our motivation-distribution were any different – that is, if we always acted altruistically or we always acted out of self-interest – these putatively valuable kinds of relationships would lose something that gives them a lot of value.

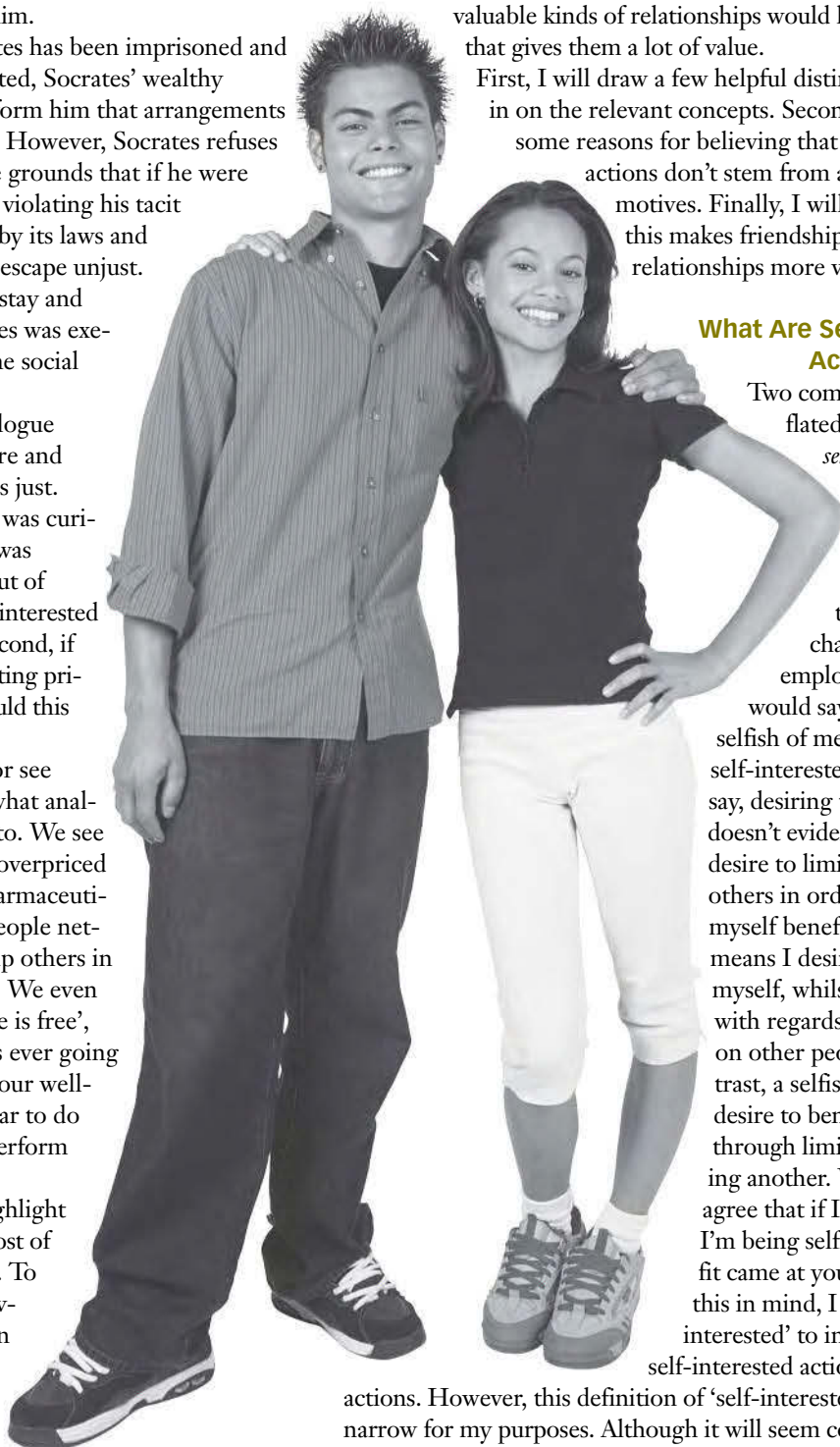
First, I will draw a few helpful distinctions to hone in on the relevant concepts. Second, I will look at some reasons for believing that most of our actions don't stem from altruistic motives. Finally, I will explain how this makes friendships and loving relationships more valuable.

What Are Self-Interested Actions?

Two commonly conflated concepts are *selfish* desires and *self-interested* desires. Let's say I want to go to college to improve my chances of future employment. Most

would say that this isn't selfish of me; however, it is self-interested. That is to say, desiring to go to college doesn't evidently mean I desire to limit or harm others in order to bring myself benefits; rather, it means I desire to benefit myself, whilst being neutral with regards to the effect on other people. By contrast, a selfish desire is a desire to benefit myself through limiting or harming another. We can all agree that if I steal from you, I'm being selfish – my benefit came at your cost. With this in mind, I will use 'self-interested' to include both self-interested actions and selfish

actions. However, this definition of 'self-interested' is still too narrow for my purposes. Although it will seem counterintuitive



at first, I am going to broaden what I mean by 'self-interested' even further. In order for me to do this, we will need to consider two common kinds of non-self-interested desires that many of us intuitively think we frequently act on the basis of.

The first kind of non-self-interested motive is purely *altruistic*: a desire to benefit another without desiring any benefit in return. A soldier who jumps on a grenade to save the life of his brethren-in-arms is intuitively acting from an altruistic desire. The other kind of non-self-interested desire would be a *principled* desire; this is a desire to uphold some principle for its own sake, despite your belief that you will receive no benefits. In this you act out of principle. Socrates would have been acting on a principle: he wanted to perform the just act of accepting his execution – despite possibly knowing that it would bring neither him nor anyone else benefits.

For the purposes of this article, I will consider principled desires as being self-interested. It may seem odd to call a principled desire self-interested, since when you act out of principle you aren't necessarily acting to benefit yourself in any way; but I will consider it self-interested merely for convenience. However, what will matter for my argument is that most of our desires don't stem from altruistic motives – from the desire to help others. So for convenience, principled desires that are not desires to help others can be grouped together with self-interested desires, as non-altruistic.

Are Most Of Our Actions Self-Interested?

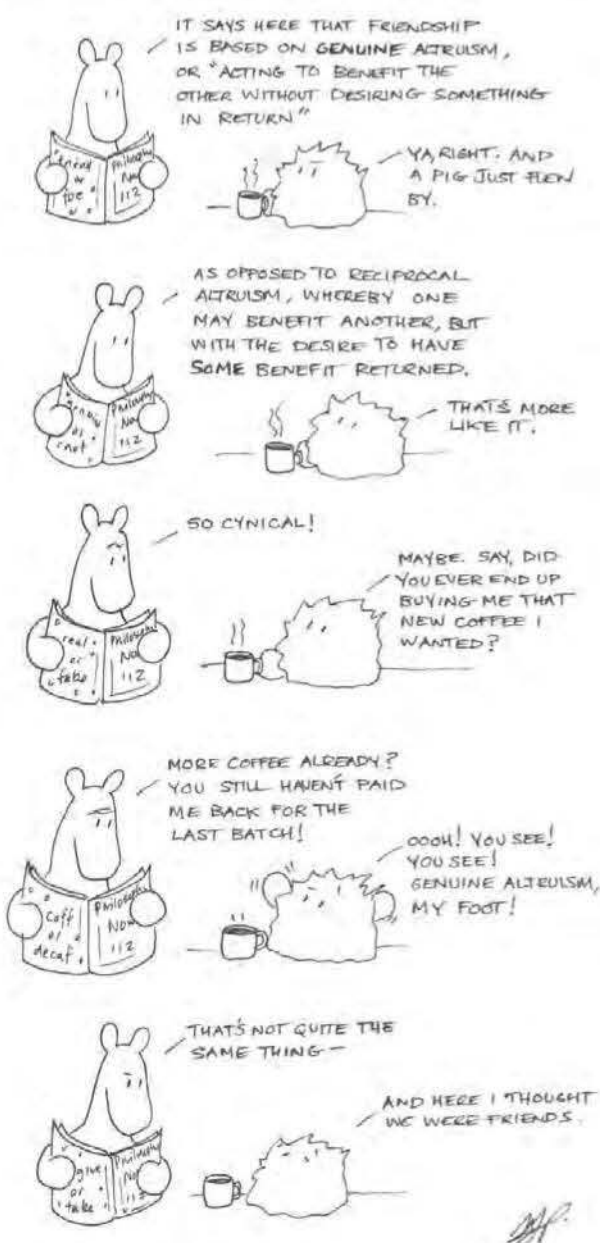
I don't know about you, but when I am reflecting on the fact, I find that I act out of self-interest a lot more than I would otherwise care to admit. For instance, I find that I network frequently – meaning that I may appear to act altruistically whilst really acting to advance my career. Of course this doesn't prove that most of our actions are self-interested, so let me cite some empirical evidence to support that claim.

Jesus told a parable commonly known as 'The Good Samaritan'. In this parable, a severely injured man left on the side of the road is passed by a priest and a Levite. Priests were supposed to be moral: they were expected to behave altruistically more often than not. Levites, who were the practical assistants to the priests, were expected to act similarly. However, both of these people passed by the injured man without coming to his aid. Yet a Samaritan – a member of a group of people hated by Jesus's target audience – came by, took pity on the injured man, and helped him.

In their article 'From Jerusalem to Jericho' in *JPSP* #27 (1973), social psychologists J.M. Darley and C.D. Batson speculate that perhaps the explanation for the actions of the holy men in comparison to the Samaritan, was that the Samaritan had the time to help the injured man, whilst the priest and the Levite did not; the holy men were in a hurry to get to the Temple. More generally, they argue that whether or not people behave altruistically may depend on whether or not they have some other self-interested desire to satisfy, and that the self-interested desire will frequently trump the altruistic desire.

To test this idea, in 1973 Darley and Batson told two groups of subjects studying for the (Catholic) priesthood that they had to give a talk in a nearby building on either seminary jobs or the Good Samaritan. In both groups of subjects, different 'hur-

SIMON + FINN



SIMON + FINN CARTOON © MELISSA FELDER 2016 PLEASE VISIT SIMONANDFINN.COM

riedness' conditions were applied: some in either group were told that they were already late for the talk, whilst others were told that they had a few minutes to get to the talk, and should head over. On their way to the other building, a 'victim' was slumped, moaning and coughing in a doorway the subjects had to pass through.

Strikingly, Darley and Batson found that the primary factor that determined whether or not subjects would stop to help the victim was how much in a hurry the subjects were: when they were in a hurry, they were much less likely to stop and help the victim. The topic of the talk didn't make any difference! Even when subjects were told that they were going to give a talk on the Good Samaritan, this didn't cause increased

altruism. Generally, for most subjects, the self-interested desire trumped whatever altruistic desires they may have had. Given that in this case in particular it should seem obvious that we should act altruistically, and we don't, surely it follows that we wouldn't act altruistically in many situations that *don't* so obviously demand it? Accordingly, it seems reasonable that in most situations, our self-interested desires trump our altruistic desires in a similar way.

What about that subset of non-altruistic desires I called 'principled' desires? Do we frequently act out of principle? A famous experiment known as the Ultimatum Game seems to support the idea that we do.

The experiment goes as follows: Two players are placed in locations that prevent them from seeing each other. One player is allocated \$100 by the experimenters, and the other player is not given any money. Call the person who gets \$100 John, and the person given nothing Sarah. Sarah is told that John has been given \$100. John and Sarah are both told that John must make an offer to Sarah before he can keep any money. He is to offer Sarah some portion of his money, and should Sarah accept his offer, she keeps what she was offered, and John keeps the rest. However, should Sarah reject his offer, both participants will leave with nothing.

The rational thing for the Sarahs to do is to accept the offer no matter what it is (as long as it is more than nothing). After all, whatever John offers her, she will walk away with more money than she would otherwise have had. However, it turns out that if the Johns low-ball the Sarahs by offering anything below about \$30, most Sarahs will reject it. This suggests that Sarahs are acting from some *principle of fairness* – that although neither Sarah nor John will benefit from Sarah's rejection of a low offer, Sarahs feels that a low offer is unfair and decline it out of principle. It is possible that the Sarahs are suppressing their immediate self-interested desires with the instinctive hope of satisfying a higher-yield self-interested desire for John to offer more money, even though the experiment is set up so that this isn't an option. But even if this were the explanation, it doesn't help the claim that most of our actions stem from altruistic desires, and indeed, offers support against it.

The Principle of Rarity

It looks like the claim that most of our actions result from non-altruistic motives has some convincing empirical support. You might feel some concern for humanity if you accept this conclusion, but I want to argue that it has a bright side to it.

First, I want you to think about a principle that makes some things valuable, which I call *the principle of rarity*. Then I will try to show why the fact that most of our actions are self-interested allows the principle of rarity to make our friendships and loving relationships more valuable.

The principle of rarity is a bit of a mouthful:

The principle of rarity: For any given thing X which is neither intrinsically bad, nor practically bad, nor morally bad, X is more valuable if it is rare. Or put positively, if X is morally good, or is intrinsically or practically good (but not morally so), then X is more valuable if it is rare.

This needs a bit of unpacking.

First, what does 'intrinsic value' mean, and why does it matter?

If something is intrinsically bad, for example, this means that it is bad for its own sake. In other words, absent any overriding pragmatic reasons, we will want to avoid it. For example, many have claimed that an experience of unpleasantness is intrinsically bad insofar as we all want to avoid it as long as there is no overwhelming practical reason for us to want it. So suppose an evil surgeon captures me and says that he's going to perform a potentially painful and unpleasant operation on me. He gives me two options: either I can choose to have a painless operation, or I can choose to endure painful surgery. All of us would opt for the absence of the pain since it wouldn't benefit us in any way. Even though in some circumstances pain can bring us benefits, such as causing us to care for an injured part of the body, when there is no practical reason for it, we don't want it. The experience of unpleasantness is intrinsically bad. This matters here because if something is intrinsically bad, then the fact that it's rare would not add value to it. For instance, our olfactory experience of a skunk's spray is rare, but its scarcity in our lives does not add value to the experience when we do have it.

Now by 'no intrinsic moral value', I mean something that has no moral value at all. For example, rocks don't have any moral value. Indeed, it would be a category mistake to think that they do; a rock isn't the kind of thing that *could* have moral standing. Yet non-moral things can still derive value from the principle of rarity. The Grand Canyon, Greek statues, or Roman triumphal arches might all be considered non-moral, yet they are valued more because there is a paucity of them. Or again, rare intrinsically good (that is, pleasant) gustatory experiences, say of a rare dessert, are more valuable than other more common intrinsically good gustatory experiences.

Now you might think that what determines the higher value of all of these things is the fact that they have aesthetic value, but I don't think that's right. Many flowers are beautiful; but the rare middle-mist red flower is even more valuable because it is rare.

What about the 'non-morally bad' condition in the principle, and why does it matter? Well, we intuitively think that for morally bad actions, the possibility that they are rare wouldn't make them more valuable. For example, the actions of the Ku Klux Klan are rare, but that certainly doesn't make us value them. Since the actions of the KKK are morally repugnant, they aren't in the class of things that could have value added to them by rarity. By contrast, morally good things *can* have value added to them due to their rarity. For example, in addition to the fact that we value them for their moral goodness, the morally praiseworthy actions of Martin Luther King or Gandhi are *even more* valuable to us because they are rare. So things that are good, both in moral and non-moral terms, can derive additional value when they are rare.

The principle of rarity shouldn't come as a surprise to us, as we seem to adopt the principle in our day-to-day lives. Zoos capitalize on it. We even come up with words to denote things that derive much of their value from the fact that they are rare, such as 'delicacy'.

Where Much of the Value in Relationships Comes From

So we've endorsed the principle of rarity's claim about what kinds of things can have more value due to their rarity. Assuming you're on board with this, I now turn to the question of why friendships and loving relationships are valuable. For simplicity I am going to focus on friendships, but will extend my argument to loving relationships briefly at the end. As you have probably guessed, I think that what at least partially constitutes the value of these kinds of relationships is that there's something rare about them.

Some have claimed that what constitutes friendship is consistent altruistic behavior toward the friend. We can at least say that friendship obtains when we act on the basis of desires to benefit the other without desiring some return *significantly more frequently than normal*. Call this the *skewed altruism* view. On this view, what constitutes a friendship is that each member in the relationship acts on the basis of an abnormally-skewed-toward-altruism ratio of altruistic to self-interested desires. Even if you don't think skewed altruism is what *constitutes* a friendship, it does seem at least that friendships consistently *yield* skewed altruism, and so this can still be a cause of value in our friendships. Indeed, I frequently go out of my way to help my friends, and they tend to do the same for me.

Many readers might be thinking that, actually, friendships are constituted by what is known as *reciprocal altruism*. However, in reciprocal altruism, one may benefit another with the ultimate desire to have some benefit returned. This is a self-interested motivation. Networking could be an example of this sort of reciprocal altruism. Genuine altruism, on the other hand, is characterized by the desire to benefit another without expecting to be benefitted as a result. If the benefit *is* reciprocated, then all well and good; but it doesn't *expect* that reciprocation, nor is it motivated by any such expectation.

Now it's very difficult to test whether or not someone is

acting from genuine or reciprocal altruism. After all, any putative case of genuine altruism could be reciprocally-motivated altruism in disguise. Consequently, introspective arguments and intuitions must suffice to support the claim I'm going to make about genuine altruism. I hope I can convince you with these tools.

Imagine that you have a best friend called Brad. Without you knowing it, tragically, Brad has become paralyzed and mute. Now imagine moreover that you are a subject in the Good Samaritan experiment, and that when you are sent off to give your talk, the victim moaning on the ground in your path is Brad. You see him coughing and expressing pain. I can't be sure about you, but I would immediately assist Brad without expecting any return. Indeed, even after I recognize that due to his condition Brad cannot bring me any benefits in return, I would still want to help him. I wouldn't even ask myself, 'Should I help him out of principle, since he is a friend?' before rushing to help. No! I would behave with genuine altruism toward Brad, principles or self-interest be damned. This itself shows that friends seem to behave genuinely altruistically more frequently toward each other than toward strangers. This isn't to say that we never act from the expectation of reciprocal altruism in friendships; it is only to show that we behave out of genuine altruism *significantly more frequently than normal*. I contend, then, that friends demonstrate a rare frequency of genuine altruism toward one another.

Altruistic actions are thought to be morally good, and so they are candidates for the principle of rarity. Most of us believe that altruism is morally good. I suppose if you thought that altruistic actions were always morally bad, then my argument wouldn't go through for you; but I am willing to bet that most of you, if not all, won't bite that bullet. You might also think that perhaps the fact that we act out of principle much more frequently in friendships – we act on the principle that we ought to help our friends – makes friendships more valuable. However, as we have seen from the Ultimatum Game, acting out of principle happens frequently, so the principle of rarity wouldn't apply here. Also, acting out of principle isn't unique to friendships. We act out of principle in countless situations, so it is hard to see why principled actions would make friendships in particular more valuable.

What makes friendships valuable, then, is rather that they contain a higher-than-normal frequency of genuine altruism, and genuine altruism is extremely rare. In this world of mostly self-interested behavior, when Jon or Nathaniel consistently behave genuinely altruistically toward me, and I toward them, I value these friendships so much more. The same applies to loving relationships. If I love Jenny, then I will behave genuinely altruistically toward her much more frequently than I would with other people, and she will do the same to me if she loves me.

This is a way to see the glass as half full. Sure it's the case that most of the time we act to satisfy self-interested desires; but this makes our friendships and loving relationships rare havens for altruism – haven that we should, and I think do, cherish deeply.

© DANIEL TIPPENS 2016

Daniel Tippens is a research technician in the S. Arthur Localio laboratory at New York University School of Medicine. He is also an editor for the online magazine The Electric Agora.



Eastern Promises

Peter Adamson spots some similarities between ancient Greek and ancient Indian philosophies.



IMAGE BY CAROL BELANGER GRAFTON

When you launch a podcast and book series promising to cover the history of philosophy ‘without any gaps’ as I did about five years ago, you’re asking for trouble. Aside from the intrinsic challenges of the task, it practically invites critics to complain about things you’ve left out. And I’ve had my fair share of complaints along these lines – usually justified. The most common one, which I started to hear almost as soon as the project began, was that I shouldn’t leave out the ‘Eastern’ philosophical traditions of India and China. My feeling was initially that I had a good excuse for not covering them – namely, my total ignorance. But in due course I decided that, like ignorance of the law, ignorance of philosophy is never a good excuse. Excluding India and China from my otherwise comprehensive survey would reinforce the widespread, if tacit, assumption in the West that these traditions don’t really count as part of the history of philosophy, where, at best, they would be exotic and intriguing optional subjects. Indeed, this is precisely the way they’re presented to philosophy undergraduates, when they’re available at all.

So recently I began to release episodes on Indian thought, ameliorating the admittedly pretty serious problem of my ignorance of it by teaming up with an expert, Jonardon Ganeri of NYU. In the process, I’ve learned a lot about philosophy in India, and become even more convinced of the importance of including this material in any comprehensive assessment of the history of philosophy. In the future I hope to extend the project to Chinese philosophy, and African too.

As we cover early Indian philosophy, we’re trying to avoid making constant comparisons to the ancient intellectual traditions of Europe, lest we suggest that Indian ideas are only valuable insofar as they remind us of Plato and the rest. Yet I have to admit that the resonances are sometimes so striking that it is irresistible to mention them.

I’ll give you just two examples. First, the Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna, who con-

fronted his Hindu opponents with a critique so comprehensive that to describe it as ‘without any gaps’ would be selling it short. He argues that reality as it presents itself to us, and the language we use to describe it, are ‘empty’. Some of his arguments, and even more so, the methods of argument he devised in defense of this radical view, are strikingly similar to the skeptical techniques of Sextus Empiricus, who just happened to live at about the same time (2nd C. CE). My second example is the thinkers of the Carvaka school, whose devotion to both materialism and hedonism makes them seem uncannily like ancient Indian counterparts of the Epicureans.

Although these two parallels seem to me especially strong, other scholars have not been shy in seeing further resonances – for instance, between the idea of the transcendent reality called *Brahman* and the transcendent principles of Platonism, or more generally, the orientation towards ethics that underlies both classical Greek and classical Indian philosophy. Both traditions saw philosophy not just as a scholastic, technical enterprise (even if both traditions had their share of that), but as a way of life.

Inevitably, we are tempted to ask whether a connection between the two cultures explains such similarities. It’s not implausible. After all, Alexander the Great’s armies reached India, and his successors continued to have dealings with the subcontinent. A key text of ancient Indian thought, the *Milinda-pañha* (c.100 BCE), an early Buddhist work, even depicts a dialogue between a sage called Nagasena and the Hellenistic king of Bactria, Menander. Although we can assume that the involvement of Menander is fictional, it is significant that a Greek king was chosen as Nagasena’s interlocutor.

On the other hand, finding real proof of a historical connection between the philosophical traditions isn’t so easy. Beyond tantalizing remarks about the skeptic Pyrrho having met some Indian sages, and the Neoplatonist Plotinus joining a military expedition to the East in hopes of learning

about the philosophy of other cultures, evidence from antique literature is thin on the ground. Compounding this is the fact that the thought of, say, Sextus or Nagarjuna can be explained quite nicely without appealing to mutual influence. Sextus was responding to the Stoics, and Nagarjuna to the metaphysics of the brahminical tradition. It makes perfect sense that they would independently devise self-consciously skeptical positions as a counterpoint to the ‘dogmatic’ schools of thought they were attacking. Or again, Plotinus’s brand of Platonism seems to be a natural development from the philosophers who led up to him – something we miss if we ignore the so-called ‘Middle Platonists’, who were important influences on his thought, although little known about nowadays.

Speaking for myself, it’s too early in my exploration of Indian philosophy for me to have a firm view on mutual historical influence between these two philosophical traditions. In later periods, the influence of the Indian heritage on other cultures is of course beyond doubt. Many will think of Schopenhauer, but I think of Dara Shikuh, a Muslim prince of seventeenth century Mughal India. He translated the *Upanishads* into Arabic, and even detected a reference to this ancient text in the *Qur’an*. For him, the Islamic and Indian worldviews were not just compatible, but in deep agreement – something he tried to prove in a treatise called the *Confluence of the Oceans*, referring to the meeting of these two great traditions. If he’d been there to advise me when I first launched my podcast, Dara Shikuh would surely have encouraged me to avoid an India-shaped gap in my narrative, and reminded me that no one culture has a monopoly on wisdom.

© PROF. PETER ADAMSON 2016

Peter Adamson is the author of A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps, Vols 1 & 2, available from OUP. Both are based on his popular History of Philosophy podcast.

Colin Wilson (1931-2013)

Vaughan Rapatahana remembers the singular English existentialist.

Colin Wilson was perhaps England's only famous existentialist philosopher. Indeed, Robert Solomon's 2004 book *Existentialism* includes Wilson as the sole British representative of existentialism. (Here I'll pass over the many other designations of Wilson, such as mystic, occultist, criminologist, and so on, for his lasting philosophical achievements eclipse his other interests.) However Wilson attended no university, and achieved no academic qualifications, despite Iris Murdoch trying to convince him of the benefits of a university education; as he wrote in his memoir *The Angry Years* in 2006: "She and I took an immediate liking to one another... and when she learned that I had not been to a university, offered to get me a scholarship at Oxford, a suggestion I gratefully declined." Indeed Wilson only went to academic institutions as an intermittent writing fellow or a guest lecturer. The author of *The Outsider*, then, was himself outside the mainstream, not only of English philosophy, but of English academia too.

Wilson left school at sixteen and drifted through various jobs while pursuing his dream of becoming a writer. By the age of twenty-three he was sleeping rough on London's Hampstead Heath to save money and writing in the British Library by day. He started work on a book appropriately called *The Outsider*, examining the role of excluded lonely individuals in creating literature and art. Published in 1956 when he was only twenty-five, this book exploded onto the cultural scene bringing Wilson lasting fame and, indeed, far too much early publicity. His following book was damned by the critics and he had a couple of run-ins with the press. He and his new wife then retreated to a rural cottage in the far reaches of Cornwall on the south-west coast of England. There they lived for the rest of his life, while he wrote and wrote.

Wilson was a particularly prolific author: he wrote almost 200 books, although by his own admission he was somewhat of a 'hedgehog'. He used Isaiah Berlin's classic distinction between foxes and hedgehogs in an interview with Geoff Ward in 2001: "The fox knows many things; the hedgehog knows just one thing. So, Shakespeare is a typical fox; Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are typical hedgehogs. I am a typical hedgehog – I know just one thing, and I repeat it over and over again. I've tried to approach it from different angles to make it look different, but it is the same thing."

Wilson vs The French

Wilson's philosophical position is best delineated in his Outsider Cycle of seven books written between 1956 and 1966, with *Introduction to the New Existentialism* (1966) being perhaps his most important work of philosophy. Otherwise, philosophically, the later compilation of several of his philosophical essays entitled *Beneath the Iceberg* (1998) is notable for its concentrated attacks on French philosophy.

Most significantly, in these books, Wilson stresses that he's a *positive* existentialist philosopher – this is not a contradiction in terms. As such was always *au contraire* the pessimistic Conti-

nental existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus (as further shown in the title of his tome *Anti-Sartre* of 1981) and the later French postmodernists, such as Jacques Derrida, whom he often derided. As he revealed to Ward: "once I grasped what *Derrida* was saying I began to *bate* him." There is an irony here, in that many of Wilson's novels read somewhat 'post-modernistically' as he so earnestly strived to express his version of existentialism through his fiction.

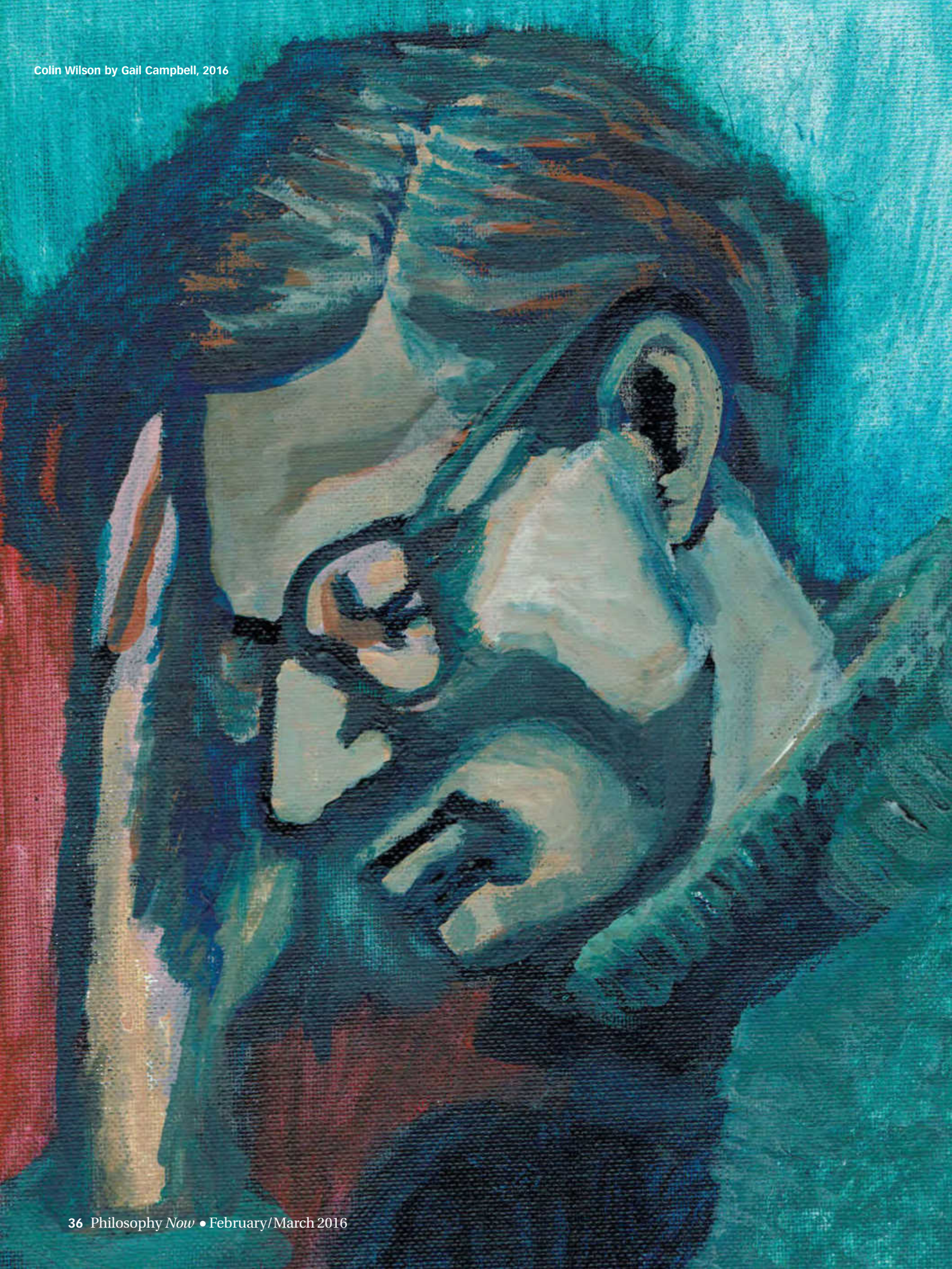
Why such opprobrium against Twentieth Century French philosophy? Because Wilson strongly believed that Camus, Sartre, Derrida *et al* had misrepresented the inherent potential of humanity – which he thought could evolve to a better state of being – and had instead either focused on a stoic resignation to the fate of man (Wilson rarely concentrated on the potential of women), or had strenuously stressed a complete disavowal of human potential. In the particular case of Camus, whom Wilson met in 1957, there is an anecdote which displays just how big a chasm existed between them:

"Wilson pointed out to Camus that there were a number of places in his [Camus'] works where characters were actually 'overwhelmed with meaning'. Wilson asked Camus why he didn't pursue that personally, and Camus pointed to a Parisian teddy boy slouching past the window, saying: 'What is good for him must be good for me also.' Wilson... got very excited, and irritable in a way, and said, 'That's nonsense. Are you telling me Einstein shouldn't have produced the Theory of Relativity because a Parisian teddy boy wouldn't understand it?'"

Wilson's Existentialism

What made Wilson's brand of existentialism so unique was his idiosyncratic incorporation of key ideas from the German proto-existentialist Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), such as '*époché*' or 'reduction', and – most importantly – 'intentionality'. For Husserl, intentionality meant that all human consciousness is *directed towards* or *about* something. Wilson agreed that all perception is intentional, but also drew from Alfred North Whitehead's notion of 'meaning perception' ('prehension') to further assert that the individual gives meaning to the world through their intentionality.

For Wilson, the completely passive observer is a myth. He was therefore particularly opposed to what we might call the 'passive' analysis of contents of consciousness by previous philosophers, notably René Descartes and David Hume, as well as Immanuel Kant and George Berkeley and much philosophy since – including what he termed the 'Existentialism Mark One' of the French. He felt that their passive understanding of consciousness had thrown philosophy completely off track. Through it, Descartes had introduced ultimate doubt with his *cogito ergo sum*; Hume went further along this sceptical route with his doubting of cause and effect; whilst Roland Barthes and his peers went even further along this trail to cast strong doubts on the possibility of any unfettered human agency – that is, of human freedom [see this issue's theme, Ed].



However, Wilson's interpretation of intentionality held that man could delineate his own state of consciousness, and moreover, could and should evolve into a more meaningful state via a rigorous 'bracketing-out' investigation of it, since meaning came from man and was not somehow imposed upon him by external things. By 'bracketing-out' (Husserl's 'reduction'), Wilson meant a systematic – he called it a 'scientific' – analysis of human mental states which 'reduced away' any erroneous preconceived ideas. If all perception is intentional, then for Wilson, the only way forward is inward.

Wilson also wanted to appropriate and build on the earth-shattering epiphanic experiences of the Romantics to abnegate the resignation of the Continental existentialists, who were mired unhappily in their stoic resignation to contingency – a passive kowtowing to human inadequacy – and to instead build once and for all an impenetrable edifice of permanently attainable expanded consciousness. This expanded consciousness is the 'real' or 'true' consciousness, for *everyday consciousness is a liar*. For this goal of consciousness expansion, Wilson also drew on Abraham Maslow's notion of *peak experiences*, insisting that by appropriately analyzing and signposting consciousness, man could evolve into a state of permanent peak experience. The optimism of a peak experience then breeds further optimism and expansion of consciousness... thus epiphanies could become the norm for those who searched within themselves and strove to achieve Wilson's specific form of disciplined self-knowledge. Friedrich Nietzsche, for Wilson, was therefore one of the few philosophers worth studying, because of Nietzsche's eternal positivity about the possibility of human overcoming 'in spite of everything'. Wilson was thus temperamentally also very much an outsider, sailing well beyond the squalls of resignation and despair that beset many of his existentialist peers.

A statement Wilson made in 1988 in his *Essay on the New Existentialism* draws together his borrowings from Maslow and Husserl, and sums up his abiding philosophy concisely. He wrote that if "consciousness is intentional, then we can deliberately make it more intentional... the result would be a step in the direction of the mystic's insight."

Wilson's Transcendental Ego

Wilson is never great at detailing precisely how we can achieve this evolved consciousness. He never specifies the steps by which his new existentialism would complete a 'bracketed' examination of conscious experience. Indeed, he occasionally waxes and wanes about the possibility that psychotropic drugs could in some way aid consciousness-widening, whilst at the same time stressing that most people are just not yet ready for the broadening of their minds. He can be rather too vague at times. It would seem he agrees with Jean Gebser, who says in *The Ever-Present Origin* (trans. 1985) that man himself actually makes the chemical and neurological components of consciousness – that is, brains – explode into life, and for this reason, concentration as well as the will to work on developing inner mental states is tremendously vital. In fact, Wilson proclaimed in *Wholeness or Transcendence?: Ancient Lessons for the Emerging Global Civilization* (1992) that Gebser "seems to me possibly the most important thinker of the twentieth century." For both men, consciousness would actually seem to activate the brain,

rather than the other way around. Thus for Colin Wilson there is very definitely a Transcendental Ego, or Higher Self, even if he often depicts a rather mystical disintegration of this self. Man is not merely a set of chemical nuts and bolts, nerves and synapses. So Wilson obviously also firmly disagrees with such thinkers as Francis Crick, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.

Wilson's Linguistic Philosophy

Wilson did have considerable empathy with Twentieth Century language theorists such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin, but thought they went nowhere wide enough in their consideration of language. The evolutionary way forward lay for Wilson not only in the expansion of consciousness, but just as importantly, in the concomitant expansion of language to describe this process. He said we will need to construct a whole new way of speaking to describe the yet-to-be codified subcranial discoveries. Interestingly enough, then, Colin Wilson was not only a unique positive existentialist, but also a sympathizer with British linguistic philosophy. Indeed he proselytized for a combination of language theory and new existentialism in one overall package, and firmly believed that he would be able to unite these two major streams of Twentieth Century philosophy. Wilson had set himself a very ambitious and original lifelong project, then: one that he always felt he continued to progress in, even as he later widened his intellectual range to look into other zones, such as in an ongoing investigation of the occult. (As a bit of an aside concerning language and consciousness, Derrida somewhat deconstructed Husserl. Husserl wanted to say both that intentionality precedes language, but also that intentionality is expressed via language. The difficulty is then that intentionality cannot be free of language, and is accordingly obscured or corrupted – this is Derrida's *différance*. Wilson attempts to explain this away in a piece entitled 'Notes on Derrida for Rowan' in *Below the Iceberg*. There, regarding Derrida, he states, "if he is arguing that the inbuilt ambiguity of language can never be pinned down, then he is merely siding with various other sceptics and relativists, and needs to be taken no more seriously than they are... There are only two pockets on the billiard table of philosophy, and Derrida has undoubtedly landed us back in the one labelled 'David Hume'.")

Wilson Ultimately

Colin Wilson remains truly one of a kind, and well worthy of study both within and without the institutions that have largely disavowed or even forgotten him. The New Existentialism – Wilson's way to achieve the ultimate quasi-mystical apotheosis of consciousness – necessitates an approach whose methods might even ultimately be described as Anglo-Saxon and empirical rather than as Continental and purely rationalist.

A journalist once asked Wilson if he thought he has had any influence as a philosopher, to which he replied "none at all." However his 'phenomenological metaphysics' – as it was described by the critic Cacturimus in an issue of *The Minnesota Review* of 1967 – bears serious re-evaluation.

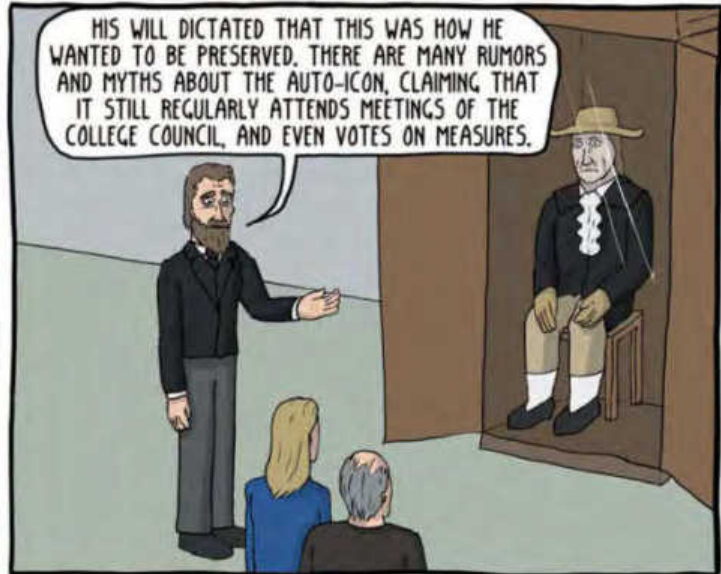
© DR VAUGHAN RAPATAHANA 2016

Vaughan Rapatahana has a PhD from the University of Auckland, is a published poet, and lives in Hong Kong and New Zealand. His latest collection of poems, *Atonement*, has just been launched.



EXISTENTIAL COMICS

A comic by **Corey Mohler** about the inevitable anguish of living a brief life in an absurd world.



Each week, Corey Mohler draws a new Existential Comics strip and posts it at <http://existentialcomics.com>



Jeremy Bentham, a 19th century British philosopher often called the father of Utilitarianism, believed that the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people is the only possible good. His will really did dictate that he be preserved as an 'auto-icon', with his original skeleton inside (he wanted his original head on top too, but they messed up the mummification process, so they had to use a wax head). Whether he thought this would bring about the

most happiness for the most people in the future is up for debate, as it mostly just seems really creepy.

Philippa Foot is a 20th century philosopher best known for reviving virtue ethics, and especially for her famous 'trolley problem', which critiqued utilitarianism. Killing an innocent person and using their organs to save five lives is an alternate version of the Trolley Problem by Judith Jarvis Thomson.



Letters

When inspiration strikes, don't bottle it up!

Write to me at: **Philosophy Now**

43a Jerningham Road • London • SE14 5NQ • U.K.

or email rick.lewis@philosophynow.org

Keep them short and keep them coming!

The Tears of Many Clowns

DEAR EDITOR: In his article in Issue 111, Mordechai Gordon, paraphrasing Freud, tells us that "people who suffer from mental illnesses such as depression and paranoia typically have a very stern super-ego and are, therefore, not able to recognize and appreciate humor." Yet some of the greatest comedians – Tony Hancock, Kenneth Williams, Spike Milligan, Frankie Howerd and many others – suffered from depression. How does he explain that?

IAN BIRCHALL, LONDON

Original Thinking

DEAR EDITOR: As a female philosopher I would like to comment on Peter Adamson's article in Issue 111 regarding the distinct scarcity of us within the philosophical arena. We are here, and we do have something to say – the issue appears to be the lack of interest in the topics we discuss rather than the lack of discussion itself. Raising humanity, which globally and historically has been the role of women, seems to be of little interest to male philosophers past and present – as if you can somehow discuss the human condition and the ideal society without taking into account the familial bonds which are the foundations of society. People are not born in a vacuum, they are born into a family, and the future of the individual depends to a large extent on the treatment (and conditioning) that they receive within that particular group. Having read many books by different philosophers, I am always struck by how little childhood is mentioned. Not only childhood itself, but the complex emotional relationships that exist within the family unit. Some philosophers may claim that this is the business of psychologists, but I disagree. If you want to discuss the meaning of life, then surely it is relevant to discuss the circumstances which that life is brought into. Obviously there are topics where this discussion would not be relevant (e.g. the nature of

truth), but this does not undermine my argument that the lack of women philosophers throughout history is due to men finding women's opinions of little interest. But someone considering an opinion irrelevant does not make it irrelevant *per se*. It does however make it very hard to get published.

This isn't a rant against men. This is an observation that many men don't find the female perspective interesting enough to be considered. Curiously, many women don't find the male perspective interesting either – which could explain why there are so few female philosophers.

LYDIA MASSERON

Liberty, Equality, Technology

DEAR EDITOR: For me it was timely that *PN*'s issue on Liberty and Equality (Issue 110) came out when it did, because I was then travelling in France, where many of the battles to shape such concepts occurred. I felt lucky travelling in France because I had the resources to do so. What has this to do with liberty and equality? Well, if everyone were equal I don't think we would have the liberty to travel as we do. Historically, states that focused on economic equality at the expense of liberty became authoritarian, thus restricting travel to a select few for fear of losing control. But as freedom has expanded around the world, equality has also grown. It seldom happens the other way around, if ever.

Whilst travelling in France I had a liberty that is often overlooked – the independence that technology provides. I had the liberty of taking photographs and seeing them instantly without having a professional develop them. I also had the liberty to extract information instantly from the internet without relying on anybody else. These liberties are available to almost everybody, thereby enhancing the equality amongst us. I don't think those technological freedoms would have developed in societies where equality was the chief pursuit. In fact, these techno-

logical freedoms emerged in countries that cultivated liberty first – the liberty to experiment and exchange ideas freely.

DAVID AIRTH, TORONTO

DEAR EDITOR: I enjoyed Sean Moran's article 'Surveillance Ethics' in *PN* 110, especially as I was sitting in a train course whilst reading the article and counted six visible CCTV cameras. However, it struck me that CCTV cameras are not the greatest concern in a 'surveillance society'. Indeed, anyone who has worked for a large government organisation knows that contracts almost always go to the lowest bidder, and thus it is often a challenge for government to ensure that its emails are working and ID cards are handed out, let alone managing to intelligently monitor countless hours of CCTV footage. Of course, such footage is available within a time limit should ever someone want to review it, but it often takes quite a remarkable event for this to happen. The reality is that although we are much recorded, we are seldom watched. So my main fear in a surveillance society is from my fellow citizens equipped with smartphone cameras and social media accounts. There are famous examples of a moment of indiscretion caught by a passer-by and uploaded to the internet that have destroyed careers and even lives. That such misfortune happens to celebrities is perhaps not too worrying, since celebrities make their money by living in the public eye; but the fact that a minor misdemeanour by a naïve teenager, or perhaps drunken stupidity from a student, can haunt them for many years to come is a significant worry. There is a large online community that takes pleasure in passing these clips around, passing judgment in a frankly evil way, and hiding behind a degree of anonymity to avoid the usual social consequences of persecuting others. No laws can prevent this happening once the clip has been uploaded and multiple copies distributed

internationally. Some might say this serves the person right for misbehaving in public, and for adults they may have a point; but for children or teenagers?

Forget worrying about Big Brother, it's our other 'siblings' who do the real harm!

SIMON KOLSTOE, BOTLEY

DEAR EDITOR: Sean Moran's article on 'Surveillance Ethics' addresses an issue that is exhaustively (to my mind) reported on, both pro and con. But surveillance is very popular when, for example, a child kidnapping occurs and the discovery of their whereabouts is aided by surveillance cameras. Police having body-cams is also becoming popular, and is urged by both police and civilians. All sorts of truth comes to light, protecting both sides of the story. Wrong-doers being identified and apprehended is a good consequence. So until surveillance is in my house uninvited, I am all for it. The sophistication of data retrieval is something to ponder, and maybe to be concerned about; but with luck the new technology for our protection will mean that the watched watching the watchers become smarter and quicker.

CHERYL ANDERSON, KENILWORTH, IL

DEAR EDITOR: Francisco Meija Uribe's article 'The Paradox of Liberalism' in Issue 110 concerns me in a number of ways. Firstly, he seeks to address the issue of fundamentalism without defining the term. Let me try to do so. A characteristic I observe in fundamentalists is taking as *knowledge* what others would take as only a *belief*. Hence, a religious fundamentalist *knows* that his or her God exists, whilst someone sharing the same religion in a non-fundamental manner only *believes* God to exist. The believer acknowledges some measure of doubt, whereas the fundamentalist admits to no doubt, and may even assert that they can prove their stance. This makes dialogue between a fundamentalist and a non-fundamentalist impossible, for the former will see the latter as being wrong, or at best, ill-informed. Hence Uribe's hope that liberals can win the argument with fundamentalists is ill-founded: the fundamentalist will not accept that there are grounds for discussion. The only hope lies in trying to persuade those exposed to fundamentalist arguments but who have not yet adopted a fundamentalist position.

Uribe refers to John Stuart Mill's dictum that we should be free to pursue our

own agendas as long as our actions do not restrict the freedom of others. However, no society has ever successfully tackled the second part of this proposition other than by restricting the freedoms of those who transgress it. When fundamentalists restrict others' freedoms, they claim they have the *right* to do so, since in their eyes their standpoint is completely justified. They will however become aggrieved when their own freedoms are restricted by non-fundamentalists.

My second concern is that Uribe repeatedly refers to 'Western' liberalism. I know followers of Buddhism and Islam – both often described as 'non-Western' religions – who are just as liberal and tolerant of the views of others as any Westerner. Claiming liberalism for the West is philosophical imperialism – an activity which can only increase hostility and strengthen the stance of the non-Western fundamentalist.

MICHAEL SHAW, HUDDERSFIELD

Can Robots Wrestle with Ethics?

DEAR EDITOR: As an old Expert System programmer, I read with great interest Robert Newman's article entitled 'Can A Robot Be Ethical?' in Issue 110. His article raises some important issues, but he might wish to consider two additional arguments. Firstly, there is the possibility of programming computers to consider ethical decisions, as long as, like humans, they judge within a given 'sphere of responsibility'. We do not expect a police constable to make judgments on launching missiles. Are we expecting computers to be omniscient, whereas humans are clearly not? Secondly, there is the issue of equity. Magna Carta gives expression to moral responsibility by guaranteeing judgment by one's 'peers'. Are the autonomous robotic weapons described by Mr Newman's article our 'peers'?

ANDREW J. LEWIS MSC FLS

CHELMSFORD, ESSEX

Uncommon Sensations

DEAR EDITOR: In her excellent article in Issue 110 on Thomas Reid and the fading of the Scottish Enlightenment, Toni Vogel Carey pays tribute to Reid's defence of common sense as a response to Humean scepticism. Common sense beliefs about the existence of physical objects and other minds, for example, have a robust credibility that sceptical sophistries cannot match. However, on

the topic of perception, which is often the starting point for sceptical philosophy, it may be worth elaborating Reid's thinking in more detail, to show the effectiveness of his arguments.

Scepticism about what we can conclude about the world as a result of our perception of it (as found in Descartes, Hume, Berkeley and many philosophers before and since) is generally based on the argument from illusion. A stick in a jar of water looks bent, but is in fact straight; a cold hand finds warm water hot, whilst a hot hand finds the same water cool; an apparent lurker in the bushes can turn out to be mere shadows. Examples such as these are used by sceptics to show that our senses are unreliable and therefore that we do not know that reality is as we perceive it to be.

Reid rebutted this argument very effectively. He asked, how do we know that our senses have failed us on any of the occasions cited? By further use of our senses, of course! The stick in the jar looks bent, but further use of our senses will show that it is in fact straight, and likewise with the other examples. We only know that our senses fail us at times because most of the time they do not. So mistaken perceptions do not provide a sound basis for a sceptical philosophy. (Two centuries after Reid, Gilbert Ryle expressed the same argument in terms of currency and counterfeits. You may encounter a counterfeit note, but it would be foolish to then wonder if the whole currency could be counterfeit. You cannot have a counterfeit without some genuine currency to contrast it with. Likewise, you cannot have sensory mistakes without genuine sensory experience to contrast them with.)

Unfortunately, however, Reid also thought that common sense validated his conventional religiosity. Reid accepted the argument from design, and believed that the existence of God was evident from all the examples of apparent design we see in nature. The existence of such things as parasites, predators and suffering were treated as complicating factors, not as evidence against a benevolent deity. The theory of evolution put paid to the argument from design. Unfortunately for Reid, he'd pinned much of his philosophy on design, so its collapse seriously damaged his standing among philosophers.

Hume has fared much better. His philosophy is held in high regard and even

his most sceptical arguments are still found to be challenging, if not compelling. The contrast with Reid is not without its ironies, however. Hume often appeals to our common sense when trying to persuade. In his analysis of miracles, for example, a key point is that everyday experience tells us that people are prone to lying, exaggeration, errors and wishful thinking; so reports of miraculous events should always be treated with scepticism.

Perhaps if Hume had listened to Reid on perception, and Reid had listened to Hume on religion, the Scottish Enlightenment would not have faded as it did. Still, common sense tells us that Scotland is as good a place as any to have an Enlightenment, and that a second flowering of it is not out of the question.

LES REID, EDINBURGH

Absurd Speculations?

(Please see ad for Fred's book on p.2)

DEAR EDITOR: I enjoyed reading Fred Leavitt's 'Dancing with Absurdity' in Issue 110. However Leavitt failed to mention that we live in a mainly rationally-connected world, which gives our lives a sense of continuity. I am sure that even Leavitt lives his daily life in full expectation of this rational continuity. For example, when he parks his car and later returns to his vehicle, he expects to see the vehicle and not that it has been changed into a pumpkin. How else could Leavitt or anyone else plan their lives, if it was not for rational continuity? The reason that Leavitt can plan his daily life is that, contrary to what he says, he does assess probabilities without certainty. When he returns to his car it is most likely – a greater probability than any other outcome – that it will be intact. It is also far more likely that his vehicle would have been vandalised than it had shrunk and been placed in a matchbox.

Induction [generating scientific laws from observation] follows similar arguments, in that it claims that the future is more likely to follow the past unless there is reason to the contrary. Science is also underpinned by other principles, including Ockham's Razor. Using these methods we can gain useful provisional insights into the world we inhabit, whilst accepting that certainty is beyond our grasp.

RUSSELL BERG, MANCHESTER

DEAR EDITOR: Fred Leavitt invites us to spot the error in his stimulating article,

in which he sets out a case for what I might call 'super-radical scepticism'. Nothing is certain and all possibilities are equally likely, he concludes. I would agree that we can be 100% certain about very little. But Fred goes too far with the second bit. There are more probable explanations of animal droppings in the park than Fred's unicorns, whilst no evidence will prove the non-existence of unicorns. Where I believe he trips up is in saying that without some certainty to rest on, probability cannot be meaningfully assessed. Quite the opposite: probability *only* has meaning in a world of uncertainty. If I run for a bus, I improve the probability that I will catch it, but I certainly can't be certain that I will!

All possibilities are equally valid only in the sense that each fails to deliver certainty. But once we forego certainty we can weigh up competing theories – and have some great discussions about the best criteria to apply to this task.

JON CAPE, STIRLING, SCOTLAND

DEAR EDITOR: I enjoyed Fred Leavitt's article, but I believe there are two ways out of the impasse of radical scepticism. One was expressed by W.V.O. Quine in his *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951) and the other by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (1969).

Leavitt is sceptical about empirical approaches to what is knowable. On an individual basis one can agree. But Quine demonstrates that knowledge is a *collective* endeavour: not so much an individual epiphany but a cumulative, shared achievement over time. I do not decide personally that hedgehogs are prickly, but rely on collective knowledge to warn me off them – along with porcupines, gorse and cacti, which I know in advance will cause an unpleasant sensation if I touch them. Over time a body of knowledge accretes. It's most secure at its centre, but less so at the edges. At the edge of this 'fabric of knowledge' is experience. Experience – empirical discovery – is the agent of new insights, and as the insights creep in from the edges, the entire fabric settles into a new configuration. This point of view (which, to be fair, Leavitt acknowledges) takes away the burden of establishing all knowledge for oneself and puts what's knowable in terms of consensus. Another aspect of this thinking is to say that knowledge consists of 'models' of the world, and as with other types of model,

they come and go. This takes the pressure off words like 'truth' and 'knowledge', which have become distressed by centuries of over-use.

Wittgenstein's approach is to recognise the other face of truth, namely doubt. We deal with doubt every day. So what, we might ask, does doubt do for us? We can only have doubt where it is reasonable to suppose that somewhere else there is a relative certainty against which the doubt is counterposed: Wittgenstein writes, "A doubt which doubts everything is not a doubt." This opens up an entirely novel arena: What it is that we take as true that enables us to have legitimate doubt? Without that truth, our doubt would simply be a metaphysical stance, not an investigative tool. Wittgenstein warns us in *On Certainty* against the search for 'transcendental certainty'. It was his colleague, G.E. Moore, who worried about how he could 'know' that his hand was real, or how he could 'know' that he was looking at a tree. Wittgenstein solves that predicament by suggesting that we do take many things as being true, often without realizing it – expressed by Wittgenstein in his view that nobody bothers to check that his feet are on the end of his legs when he stands up from a sofa.

JOHN COMER, BIRMINGHAM

DEAR EDITOR: I think that most philosophers will find Fred Leavitt's essay on radical scepticism unsatisfactory. He cites G.E. Moore's argument that if a seemingly sound argument leads to an implausible conclusion, the argument may not be sound after all. This is a somewhat weakened version of the argument known to philosophers as *reductio ad absurdum*: if an argument leads to an absurd or unreasonable conclusion, then the argument is fallacious. This is true even if the cause of the failure is not immediately apparent. Thus a rational argument that undermines the idea of rational thought is a self-contradiction.

My sense is that Dr Leavitt finds the idea of radical scepticism to be self-evident. If that is the case, then traditional philosophy will not be of much use to him. He might want to consider the world of art as a better medium for his self-expression and self-understanding. I suppose that the best artists fully engage their minds with their work, but this engagement is somewhat different from that of a scientist, historian or philoso-

pher. It relies more on a kind of immediate intuition and less on discursive reasoning. In the early part of the Twentieth Century, there was an art movement known as 'Dadaism', which seemed to hold convictions similar to those of Dr Leavitt. Marcel Duchamp was a member of this movement. Dadaism can be partly understood as a response to the horrors of the First World War. When we find that our practical lives are becoming increasingly irrational, then the idea of a reasonable life starts to seem like a cruel hoax. Dadaism might be interpreted as an attempt to make an affirmation of life after intellectual death. But such an afterlife might be rather short. The life of the mind depends on finding some kind of balance between rational faith and rational doubt. Radical skepticism is too unbalanced, and so it cannot carry us very far. But the related idea of *radical questioning* might be more productive.

D.N. DIMMITT, LAWRENCE, KANSAS

DEAR EDITOR: Whenever someone makes some sort of philosophical claim, the burden of proof rests on that person to back up that claim. However, in asserting that radical skepticism is the correct epistemological position, Fred Leavitt spectacularly fails to do so. After all, if it is truly impossible for us to know the truth of anything, then how can he claim – without contradicting himself – that radical skepticism is true? Moreover, he opines that reasoning is just full of pitfalls such as infinite regresses, and uncertain assumptions; but isn't reasoning what he is utilizing throughout his article to prove his case? To use – as he calls it – a discredited epistemological tool himself in order to prove his position is therefore the height of hypocrisy and wholly disingenuous. The death knell of his position comes at the end of his article, when he states "Possibility 2. Radical skepticism is correct. We cannot know anything, apart from the fact that radical skepticism is correct." Critically, he doesn't prove that; nor can he. Yet if one is going to go out on a limb and claim that one's theory is right, then it must be able to be tested and verified. In short, one must be able to prove her stance. Dr Leavitt's theory, therefore, fails because it cannot be proven to be right. On the contrary, it entirely appeals to ignorance.

TRACEY BRAVERMAN,
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Who Am I?

DEAR EDITOR: While it would be wrong to dismiss the role of memory in identity as described in Sally Latham's 'Shaping the Self' (Issue 110), I would also point to the role played by the fact that we are always at a particular point in (subjective) space and time, with an experience of continuity. Consider some thought experiments derived from the movie *The Sixth Day* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. In it, a corporation has developed the technology to clone individuals and implant memories (back) into them. Henchmen are killed; then, thanks to capital and technology, basically resurrected.

Would this necessarily constitute the resurrection of the individual that died? The problem for me is that being killed and brought back as a perfect replica of myself would still involve a major disruption in the continuity of my particular presence in space and time. My replica may be just *like* me and have my memories. But still, would it be the 'me' that had died? A rash materialist might boast, "But of course! Same body; same brain; same you!" – but we might wonder, if the technology did exist, would they be willing to put their money where their mouth is? Or, being civilized people, we might settle for a less drastic scenario: one in which the replica was created while the original is still alive. Same mental makeup and memories; but in this case we could confidently say the original identity is *not* continued through the replica, since identity is anchored in the original body.

Again, I am not dismissing Latham's point. Rather I am sharing her uncertainty, and drawing out what seemed implicit throughout her explorations – that what we are dealing with is not a single criterion, but a feedback loop between mental states, memories of those states as recorded in any kind of journal, and the perceiving thing – that particular and continuing point in space and time that we, as conscious beings, always are.

D. TARKINGTON, NEBRASKA

DEAR EDITOR: In Issue 110 I found Sally Latham on memory and identity very interesting. Perhaps another view of identity, starting from first principles, might be worth considering. In the first place, this is what 'I' know about 'I': 'I' can see the body I inhabit in the mirror, but not the 'I'. I am directly aware of 'me' (I

assume you are aware of 'you'). But without a body to inhabit, 'I' would be meaningless. I am the thing that drives this body. I am the thing that is conscious of the world, constructing in my mind a picture of the world which contains everything I know. Some things I can picture, but others have no pictorial form. I cannot picture 'I' or my consciousness in any form. There are many things in our picture which have no pictorial form or any position in space. The 'I' is one of these – it is the necessary subject of consciousness. To look for it anywhere is a category mistake.

ROY ANDERSON, YORKSHIRE

Atheism On Its Own Terms

DEAR EDITOR: At the end of his letter in Issue 111, Dr Stephen Anderson expresses the hope "to see someone attempt a rational defence of Atheism *on its own terms*." So here goes! Atheism does not deny the existence of one or more gods; rather, it denies the *conceptual coherence* of any god hypothesis yet offered by any religion. The question of such hypothesised gods' existence then simply not arise. Atheism can thus be seen as the application of a *general* approach to knowledge, which requires *any* hypothesis worthy of consideration to be conceptually coherent and potentially testable, and which denies that belief, however strong, is evidence for anything. This is a thoroughly *rational* position to maintain.

ROGER JENNINGS, LONDON

DEAR EDITOR: In my language game, and apparently in the language games played by those of your readers whose letters appeared in PN 110, atheism is used to mean no more than the idea of seeing nothing persuasive in theists' arguments for the existence of God. The term entails no claim to prove God's nonexistence. There's nothing irrational in that. In the language game as played this way, what would be irrational, absurd even, would be to discuss atheism without reference to theism. Christians I have known have also readily conceded that they cannot prove the existence of God. For them (and perhaps Dr Anderson shares this view), there would be no reason to abandon their faith unless their God's existence were disproved. There's nothing irrational in that position, either.

DAVE MANGNALL, CHESHIRE



Books



The Most Good You Can Do by Peter Singer

THE MOST GOOD YOU CAN DO IS A marvelously provocative and intriguing book. We

would expect no less from Peter Singer, who has been bringing out such books for forty years, at the rate of one per annum. He has become downright notorious for defending positions such as infanticide, euthanasia, sports doping, and bestiality, and yet anyone who has heard him speak can attest to his dispassionate, open-minded, and rational manner.

The key to Singer's particular beliefs has always been his uncompromising espousal of the ethical philosophy called utilitarianism. Thus, his breakout book, *Animal Liberation* (1975), about the cause with which he is most identified, derived from his simply having taken utilitarianism seriously. Utilitarianism holds that one ought always to do that which will have the best overall consequences. Singer's insight – which in fact was shared by utilitarianism's classic expounders, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick – was that this dictum embraces all sentient beings. What matters, then, are the consequences of one's actions for all animals, and not just for human beings. From this it follows, by Singer's reasoning, that almost all current use of other animals for human purposes should cease forthwith.

In a similarly straightforward way, the present book draws out practical implications from the central utilitarian imperative to maximize the good. This time the focus is on philanthropy. Right off the bat we can see that the notion could pose a problem for Singer because the very word 'philanthropy' literally means love (*philos* in Greek) for humanity (*ánthropos* in Greek), but of course Singer would want us to be concerned about nonhumans as well. (Oddly Singer does not mention this, although he devotes a chapter to the substance of this point, if not its etymology.) But Singer also has an issue with the 'phil' part of the word (although, again, he does not comment on the etymology). For Singer is at pains to impress on us the importance of numerical calculation over emotional responsiveness.

Joel Marks critiques Peter Singer's popular ethics, whilst William Irwin asks if pure ethics exists at all.

'Is Love All We Need?' is the title of one of his chapters, and Singer's answer is decidedly: quite the contrary. Singer maintains – indeed, this is the book's main claim – that in order to be truly ethical in our giving, we should take a cold-eyed, actuarial approach to philanthropy. Singer labels this 'effective altruism', and what this book does is take that green eyeshade and, so to speak, run with it.

The results are sweeping. They are also often sufficiently counterintuitive to raise the eyebrows of anyone not wearing Singer's eyeshade. So for example, Singer frowns on donating to an art museum when you might instead contribute to a charity that saves lives in a developing country. By the same token, albeit seemingly at odds with the do-gooder stereotype, Singer applauds earning gobs of money on Wall Street rather than being a social worker or even a medical doctor, provided you will donate most of your earnings to helping the poorest of the poor in the most cost-effective ways. And, he notes, this could be so even if some of your investments caused harm, provided only that the good accomplished by your philanthropy will 'outweigh' it (p.51). Never one to avoid controversy, Singer also turns a jaundiced eye on charities that provide guide dogs to the blind or that give cows to poor people, in this case not because of animal exploitation, but because the same money could do so much more good if spent on bednets to prevent malaria.

Effective altruism is nothing short of an entire ethics of how to live life. Philanthropy (so-called) is thereby transformed

from a residual component of our existence into its guiding theme. It is the full flowering and implementation of utilitarianism. From deciding whether to eat out, to deciding whether to have children, from choosing a mate to choosing an occupation, every facet of one's life is to be assessed in terms of its payoff for the welfare of all sentient beings on this planet (and on others if we could affect them). And since resources are finite, this will mean in practice that our focus should always be on those in the most need. Specifically for someone, say, in the United States, this will likely mean helping impoverished human beings overseas and nonhuman beings in all countries where habitats of wild animals are being destroyed and/or domestic animals are caught up in industrial commodification. I am also pleased to see that Singer has put planetary defense against asteroids (he might even better have mentioned comets) on the ethical map.

Feelings & Calculations

Clearly there is much to like and also much to be astonished if not outright outraged by in Singer's proposals. Certainly nothing that he says can be blithely dismissed; his ideas always merit thoughtful engagement equivalent to his own. For example, it would be easy enough to label him 'hard-hearted'. But despite appearances, and at times even despite his own statements, I see in Singer's philosophy a powerful core of feelings. Thus, while he dismisses 'warm-glow' giving, such as to the Make-a-Wish Foundation, which,

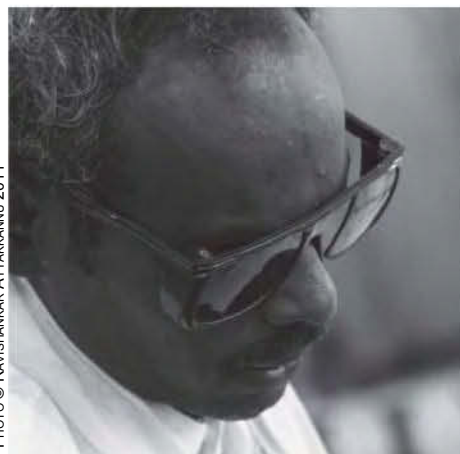


PHOTO © RAVISHANKAR AYYAKANNU 2011



Is money better spent on preventing malaria than on helping the blind?

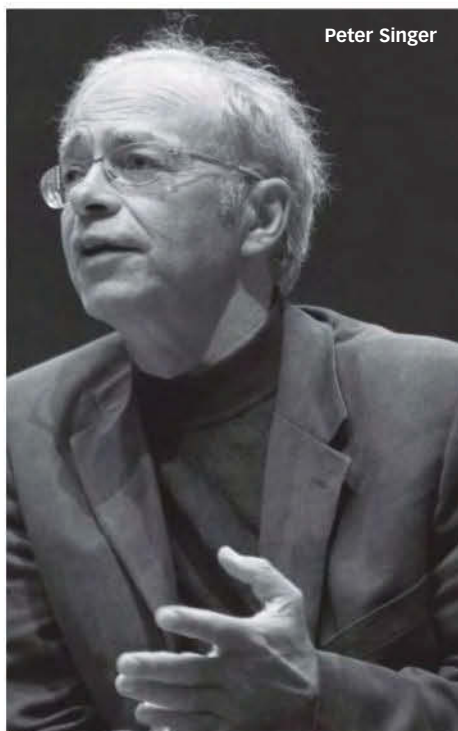
MALARIA PATIENT PHOTO © RODD WADDINGTON 2014

sometimes at significant expense, grants the wishes of children suffering from life-threatening diseases, Singer approvingly tells the tale of a graduate student who donates five percent of her modest income to the Fistula Foundation, “which, for about \$450, performs surgery [in the developing world] to repair... a condition that causes young women ... to leak urine and feces... as a result of which they often become social outcasts for the rest of their lives” (p.33). Now if that doesn’t pack a punch, what would?

It is remarkable indeed that in a book which is all about doing the math to figure out how to give most effectively, the bulk of the text seems devoted to anecdotes. But even when the math really does make a difference, heartstrings must be pulled in the end. For example, if you found out that \$10,000 would grant the wish of one dying child in the U.S. but save the lives of fifty children in another country, why would you give to the overseas charity if you simply didn’t care about people in other countries?

This sort of question is precisely what so exercises Singer. Research has shown that we are far more sensitive to local suffering or vivid images of individual pain than to statistics. We can also understand evolutionarily why this would be the case, given the small-group settings in which our species evolved. This is why Singer is so mistrustful of a reliance on feelings for doing the right thing, which for him means maximizing the good. But how can our feelings or other psychic tendencies be overridden if they are, as it were, hard-wired?

Singer argues that this is a job for quantitative reasoning. But why should reason work where emotion has failed? In fact Singer’s book is addressed, explicitly at times, to people who are already disposed to quantitative thinking, such as students at MIT. But these, apparently, are a definite minority. So his proposal can sound elitist, as if to say, we ‘brights’ (to use Daniel Dennett’s word) will strategize the most effective actions from our abstract heights, while the plebs, who can be motivated only by feelings – the aid workers toiling in the field, etc – will carry them out on the ground. But even more to the critical point is that (as seems obvious to me) reason must itself appeal to feelings if it is to have traction. Perhaps Singer would not deny this. His bottom line may simply be that reason and emotion need to work in concert. And since emotion tends to receive the most press, he has taken to



Peter Singer

emphasizing the contribution reason, and in particular the numbers, must make to enable us to do the most good. If this is what Singer is about, I can only applaud it.

Facts & Theories

What dissatisfactions with Singer’s argument remain, could then be attributed to some of its particulars rather than to his general thesis. Those particulars have to do with both facts and theory. Regarding the facts, there are obviously countless occasions when what is actually the case will have crucial bearing on the legitimacy of our ethical response. Thus, in the example above, if the cost of granting children’s wishes or of performing fistula surgery has been miscalculated, then the ethical conclusion Singer draws might not follow. But this would in no way affect the validity of his general prescription to decide on the basis of comparative costs and benefits.

However, that prescription could itself come under fire on theoretical grounds. I note, for instance, that a great many of Singer’s particular arguments in this book are not only anecdotal but also involve speculations about the relevant facts. The sad fact is that we know very few facts about the effects of our actions. In fact, the particular kind of facts that utilitarianism calls on us to consider – the long-term consequences of our actions, projects and policies – may be utterly beyond human reach. For one thing, consequences tend to branch out at an exponential rate as time goes by. For another, assessing the net

benefit of these consequences becomes problematic when you consider that different people value outcomes differently. Finally, it is not only the net result of such a mushrooming sequence that must be known, but ultimately its value relative to the net results of all alternative options. Only that action whose consequences have the highest relative net value would be the one recommended, indeed required, by utilitarianism. But which action this was could never be known.

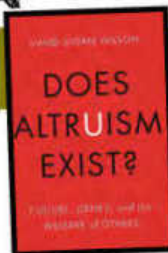
Singer has certainly adopted a less rigorous approach to calculating consequences in this book, but to me this only highlights the ultimate inadequacy of utilitarianism as a guide to life. For if it is the facts and nothing but the facts that can decide ethical issues, but these facts can never be known, then there is always going to be a lot of room for special pleading and casuistry to use whatever facts lie ready to hand or are seeming-plausibly prognosticated to support whatever happens to be one’s favored policy. It is well-traveled territory in philosophy that such analyses can lead even to outrageous ethical conclusions (eg eugenics, slavery). But even without going down that route, to show the problem of calculating ethical consequences I need only observe that two of Singer’s own philanthropic heroes – Bill Gates and Bono – have reached their superstar, and hence super-beneficent, statuses by their single-minded and all-consuming devotion to their geek pastime, or to making music. Had they instead devoted themselves to doing the most good, they might still be tinkering or jamming in their garages.

In *The Most Good You Can Do*, Peter Singer does not in fact insist that every one of us strive to do the most good, not to mention actually achieve it. He admits his own shortcomings in this regard, even when he believes the best thing to do is known and doable by him. Instead, the book can be read simply as urging us – with enlightening and compelling examples, as well as references to helpful resources – to try to live in accordance with informed and rational reflection on our major and minor life choices; and who could argue with that?

© PROF. JOEL MARKS 2016

Joel Marks is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of New Haven, and a Bioethics Center Scholar at Yale University. Read other pieces by Joel at www.docsoc.com

• *The Most Good You Can Do*, Peter Singer, Yale UP, 224 pps, £15, 2015, ISBN:0300180276



Does Altruism Exist? by David Sloan Wilson

DOES ALTRUISM EXIST?

poses an important question of enduring interest in both philosophy and biology. On one level – the level of outward action – the answer is obviously yes. If all we mean by ‘altruism’ is ‘performing actions that benefit others’, then clearly altruism exists. From an evolutionary perspective, however, there is still something in need of explanation: If making the sacrifices necessary to help others costs an organism without benefitting that organism, why would it take such actions? Why, for example, would a mother lion feed and care for her offspring?

For some time the dominant explanation in evolutionary biology has been the selfish gene theory popularized by Richard Dawkins, according to which genes are the basis for selection. Thus while it may not be in the interest of a particular lion to expend resources to feed and protect her young, it is in the interest of the mother’s genes that she do so, and so lions, like other animals, have evolved instincts to feed their young. Genes are really running the show, and they’re using individual organisms as vehicles for their replication. Of course it is not just offspring who benefit from altruistic behavior. If the cost is not too great, then animals will help others too – generally speaking, those with whom they have some relatively close genetic connection.

In contrast, group-level selection theory says that natural selection operates at the level of the group, and that a group of organisms that coordinate their activities for a common purpose can be practically conceived of as a superorganism in competition against other groups. For decades group-level selection theory was dismissed, but David Sloan Wilson is among the leading advocates for it today. Indeed, throughout much of *Does Altruism Exist?*, Wilson writes as if the matter has already been settled in favor of multilevel selection theory – the idea that selection occurs on multiple levels, including both groups and genes. For the record, the matter is not settled. Dawkins and most other biologists continue to oppose the idea. No matter which side of the debate one takes, however, it is clear that groups and the pressures they exert play some role in the process of natural selection. Indeed, Wilson argues that “The theories that claimed to explain altruism without invoking group selection turned

Why does a lioness feed and care for her cubs?



LIONESS WITH CUB © GREG WILLIS 2006

out to invoke group selection after all, in every way except using the name” (p.34).

Thoughts & Feelings

The debate among biologists concerns altruistic *activity*, but philosophers are also concerned with altruism in thoughts and feelings. And here the answer to the book’s eponymous question is unclear. Wilson devotes an entire chapter to psychological egoism: the thesis that all actions are ultimately taken in the name of self-interest. This idea is currently also out of favor, although historically it was advocated by such canonical figures as Thomas Hobbes and Jeremy Bentham.

Psychological egoism is highly vulnerable to counterexample because it makes a universal claim. To disprove it, all we need is one example of one person who at one time decided not to act in her perceived self-interest. The classic counterexample is Mother Teresa. Didn’t she repeatedly and willingly take actions to help the poor at great cost to herself? The psychological egoist has to respond that she did what she did ultimately because of self-interested motivation. Maybe she did it for the promise of heavenly reward; maybe she did it because it made her feel good about herself; maybe she didn’t even consciously know the reason she acted – but at bottom her actions were motivated by self-interest. Wilson seems to concede that there is no way to disprove psychological egoism because we have no way to read minds and no access to the subconscious motivations of either ourselves or others. However, he believes that what matters most are not the thoughts or feelings motivating people, but the actions they take.

Focusing on actions rather than thoughts or feelings, Wilson’s constant refrain is that “Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary” (p.71). On group-level selection theory it is no surprise that people act to benefit others. Within a group an altruist may be taken advantage of by a selfish member, but a group without altruists will be outcompeted by a group that includes them. Think of a basketball team. An unselfish player who passes the ball when she sees a teammate who is placed for an easier shot may not get much glory, and may even be overlooked by her teammates; but a team with at least a player or two who passes unselfishly will easily defeat another team whose players never pass. And as Wilson sees it, it is the action that matters. We might prefer a team in which every member is thinking of the good of the team with every action she takes; but what really matters is that she takes the action that’s in the best interest of the team, whether it’s passing, dribbling, or shooting. Using a different metaphor, Wilson says we may prefer to be paid in cash, but we should be willing to be paid with a check: that is, we might prefer altruism at the level of thoughts and feelings, but we should be willing to accept altruism at the level of actions.

One area in which we would expect thoughts and feelings to matter is religion. It would seem that many religions demand not just that we do the right thing and help other people, but that we do it with the right mindset. For example, from a religious standpoint it would seem that it’s not enough that I volunteer at a soup kitchen.

If my reason for volunteering is to impress and get close to someone cute, then my volunteering doesn't seem particularly praiseworthy. Wilson, however, cites a study by the Templeton Foundation which finds that even across a variety of religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, thoughts and feelings are not ultimately what matter: it is ultimately the other-helping behavior that matters. The altruistic religious ethic seems difficult to reconcile with these findings, but on Wilson's interpretation, other-helping actions and a self-interested desire for heaven can go together. Certainly some denominations would agree. For other religious groups, though, thoughts and feelings are paramount and the ideal of pure altruism is alive and well. For instance, to lack a feeling of love for others behind one's altruistic actions would be problematic for some Christians. Love of God and love of neighbor should be one's motivation, and heaven should be the natural reward of that, not the primary motivation for it.

Altruism & Economics

Whereas altruism and religion seem natural allies, altruism and economics seem natural adversaries. Then again, it depends

Michael Douglas
as Gordon Gekko
in *Wall Street*



on whether we are considering altruistic actions or altruistic thoughts and feelings. In the chapter on economics, Wilson ties group-level selection theory to Elinor Ostrom's pioneering work showing how small groups regulate themselves and adapt to local environments through mutual benefit. The rest of the chapter is disappointing unless one simply wants to hear Wilson validate one's disdain for the free market.

Wilson was apparently surprised to discover that Adam Smith didn't advocate the kind of narrow self-interest that people mistakenly attribute to him. Indeed, Wilson seems reluctant to accept that selfishness is

a narrow form of self-interest that involves disregard for others, whereas self-interest more broadly construed – as Smith does indeed construe it – involves benefitting others. Mischaracterizing free-market thinking in general, Wilson says that “it was a monumental mistake to conclude that something as complex as a large society can self-organize on the basis of individual greed” (p.114). It sounds as if Wilson is thinking of Gordon Gekko, the trader from the movie *Wall Street*, who claimed that greed is good. But real free-market economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek said nothing of the sort. Not even Ayn Rand thought that greed is good. Rand was extreme in many ways, but the heroes in her novels are not materialistic or greedy. They are, however, self-interested.

Self-interest is not equivalent to greed or any other kind of selfishness. In fact, it is very often in our own self-

interest to treat others well. The store-owner who overcharges her customers will find it bad for business in the long run. Likewise, it is in the self-interest of the basketball player to pass to the teammate with an open shot. After all, she wants to be part of the winning team. Curiously, Adam Grant's research, discussed in subsequent chapter, makes the very point that Wilson misses here. Grant finds that in business, ‘takers’, who try to get as much as they can and give as little as possible in return, do not do as well as ‘givers’ who give freely of themselves without expectation of return. Givers also do better than ‘reciprocators’ who play tit-for-tat. Wilson encapsulates Grant's conclusions by saying that givers succeed “as long as they surround themselves with other givers and avoid the depredation of takers. In other words, the business world is no different than any other enterprise requiring prosocial activities” (p.130). The only real surprise here is that Wilson finds this surprising. The self-interested wisdom of serving others has long been known, and is captured well in the old Rotary Club motto, “He profits most who serves best.”

Wilson would have done well to discuss Hayek's *The Fatal Conceit* (1988), which nicely connects the spontaneous ordering of evolution and the spontaneous ordering of free market economies. The basic insight of Hayek's book is crystallized in his conclusion that “The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design” – the point being that an economy without central planning and heavy government regulation can communicate economic information much more efficiently through the price mechanism than any centrally planned alternative.

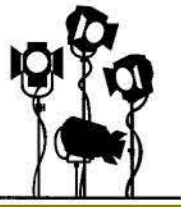
I have focused my comments in this review on areas where I disagree with Wilson, but in closing I hasten to add that *Does Altruism Exist?* is an impressive and engaging survey of the vast terrain covered by his title question. Anyone intrigued by the subject will find this short book to be highly readable, and often insightful.

© PROF. WILLIAM IRWIN 2016

William Irwin is Herve A. LeBlanc Distinguished Service Professor at King's College in Pennsylvania, and the author of *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism Without Consumerism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

• Does Altruism Exist? Culture, Genes, and the Welfare of Others, by David Sloan Wilson, Yale UP, 2015, \$27.50, 224 pps, ISBN: 0300189494





Films

GOOD WILL HUNTING

Tamás Szabados gives it an existential analysis.

The heart of the movie *Good Will Hunting* (1997) is an encounter between Will (Matt Damon), a twenty-year-old working class prodigy, and an apparently burnt-out middle-aged therapist, Sean (Robin Williams). This is in fact a story of a Buberian I-Thou relationship which deeply touches, upsets and inspires both men to the extent that they both end up leaving behind the comfort of their old habits, move out of their homes, and leave town. Martin Buber (1878-1965) was an existentialist therapist whose thinking focused on the nature of human encounters, and this is a movie about what it takes from a Buberian perspective to be liberated from binding fears and take the dreadful first step that leads towards deeper awareness, more freedom, and a higher level of responsibility.

The opening shots show Will in a shabby, bare house on the outskirts of Boston, sitting on a chair speed-reading a book in the midst of other carelessly scattered books. Will is a janitor at Harvard University. We soon come to understand that the average working class lifestyle Will leads is in stark contrast with the brilliant intellect he possesses: in a break from mopping the floor, he sketches the solution to an extremely difficult mathematical problem left on a university chalkboard. This prompts Nobel Prize-winning professor Gerry Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgård) to seek him out. Lambeau finds Will being held for assaulting a cop. Thanks to the mathemati-

cian's intervention, Will can avoid a jail sentence, but only if he agrees to regularly see a therapist. After several failed attempts with various therapists, Will finally accepts the authority of Sean, a childhood friend of Lambeau. Sean, who is originally from the same neighbourhood and social background as Will, stands up to the boy's arrogant attempts to disqualify him, and eventually tames him into cooperation.

The encounter between Will and Sean is passionate and disturbing for both parties. Will makes Sean lose his temper at the first meeting by insulting his late wife; in return, Sean touches Will's sore spot during the second session when he points out that behind the impressive intelligence and accompanying arrogance there hides an inexperienced, timid boy. But his relationship with Sean enables Will to face his fears and find the inner resources to move on, leave his safe environment, make use of his impressive genius, and take the courage to go after the girl. Following a long period of bereavement after his wife's death from cancer, Sean also decides to leave town, and he sets out on a journey to India.

An I-Thou Encounter

It is difficult to assess the eight-session therapeutic intervention presented in the movie from a professional point of view. Sean breaches a couple of ethical rules that could get him into serious trouble were he not in a Hollywood movie: he physically assaults his patient in the first session, and

he regularly discloses information on the progress of the therapy to Lambeau. His therapy is highly unorthodox in other ways too. He holds the second session in a park; he ends the fifth session early and angrily sends away his patient because he is frustrated by his 'bullshitting' (this would be highly unusual even if he were a Lacanian); he also talks freely and abundantly about his own private life and suffering. One wonders if these sessions should be viewed as serendipity rather than therapy – an encounter in a special situation between two men with similar roots. Could it also be seen as Sean's swan song? Will is quite possibly his last case ever – so intuitively feeling the looming life change and existential challenge that this encounter poses, he breaks all the rules. As a master of the art of therapy, he plays his last game free-style, sometimes even recklessly and dangerously. The treatment takes on the character of true horizontality, and gains an existential quality for both parties.

Although it is not entirely clear which school Sean follows, we can safely say that this therapy bears many marks of an existentialist-humanistic treatment. Indeed, the encounter between the two men serves as a beautiful illustration of the underlying premises of the existentialist approach, and especially of what Buber calls an 'I-Thou' relationship. So although I just characterised the therapist's physical assault on the client as a breach of professional ethics, from a Buberian perspective we can reexamine it as a sign of deepest respect: by losing his *presence*, the therapist exposes himself to the patient and becomes extremely vulnerable. He is not only trying to teach Will that there are certain limits, he's also taking a risk. The boy could easily have used the fact of being attacked by the therapist against him: instead he seems to feel that he is being taken seriously by someone.

In *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), Irvin Yalom presents the difference between Buber's 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' ways of relating:

"The 'I' is profoundly influenced by the relationship with the 'Thou'. With each 'Thou', and with each moment of relationship, the 'I' is created



Therapy in the park:
Sean and Will



anew. When relating to 'It' (whether to a thing or to a person made into a thing) one holds back something of oneself: one inspects it from many possible perspectives; one categorizes it, analyzes it, judges it, and decides upon its position in the grand scheme of things. But when one relates to a 'Thou', one's whole being is involved; nothing can be withheld" (p.365).

Lambeau's relationship to Will would be an example of an I-It relationship. He sees Will as a member of an exceptional category: as 'a prodigy', as 'the new Einstein', as a huge potential that needs to be groomed so that he can contribute to the progress of humanity; but he doesn't see him as 'Thou': he may act as a benefactor and a mentor, but he never actually 'meets' Will. By contrast, Sean is touched by Will from the first moment. He takes him seriously as a person and his 'whole being is involved' in the encounter. He 'withholds nothing', not even his anger and frustration. Sean is always authentic, transparent, and self-revealing in his relationship with Will. Equally, he resists all temptation to diagnose him. Even when he talks about Will's past traumas, he uses common words instead of psychoanalytical categories. Over the sessions Sean creates an alliance with Will's innermost being – the part of him that had secretly desired to be discovered. As Sean points out in a memorable conversation during the fifth session, no matter how hard Will is trying to make everybody believe he's satisfied with his life, it's actually Will himself who took the first step towards something new. As Sean says, "You could be a janitor anywhere. Why did you work at the most prestigious technical college in the whole f*cking world?" There is someone within him that's looking for achieving more of his potential.

It's during the same session that Sean gets frustrated with Will's evasive replies and asks him to leave if he continues 'bull-shitting'. Sean here presents signs of impatience reminiscent of Gestalt therapy – he's all for the here and now, trying to get beyond the layers of defense mechanisms

designed to avoid contact. Sean is not working with the 'transfer' (he's not a Freudian psychoanalyst), he's working with the person who is there – *Dasein* in the Heideggerian sense. As Hans Cohn says in *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice* (1997), "On the assumption that we exist primarily in a state of relatedness, it would be meaningless to distinguish between a 'real' and a 'transference' relationship" (p.26). This also means that there's no 'countertransference', only the relationship, through which the patient also helps the therapist understand how he hasn't been able to turn the page after his wife's death. Sean's approach is risky: he might also be changed through this relationship. But this is exactly how we know that this is a genuine encounter – an I-Thou rather than an I-It relationship.

A Liberating Encounter

"The restriction of our capacity to keep the world open for what we meet and what addresses us can be innate or the result of an unsatisfactory upbringing. It manifests itself in... 'modes of illness' which show impairment in our relation to certain intrinsic aspects of Being – that is, embodiment, spatiality, temporality and mood. All these disturbances encroach on the possibility of realizing the basic ontological nature of human existence: freedom and openness toward other human beings and towards all the other beings encountered" (H. Cohn, *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice*, p.18).

What takes place between Sean and Will is a genuine encounter, then. But to what extent is it a liberating one? What must Will, and Sean, be liberated from in order to be able to experience greater freedom and openness toward other human beings? And what makes it possible for the change to occur?

In Will's case we can identify two main areas of restriction. Firstly, having grown up as an orphan and experienced abuse, his social life is limited to three childhood friends. He is unable to establish a lasting intimate relationship with a woman, and he is suspicious and defensive with who-



Films

ever he meets outside of his close circle of friends. Secondly, despite his intellectual capacities, he is unwilling to take the necessary steps to fulfill his potential, since this would involve giving up his close relationships and moving to a different area. To echo Freud's famous *bon mot*, his problems are related to loving and working. Sean sums it up like this: "Why is he hiding? Why is he a janitor? Why doesn't he trust anybody? Because the first thing that ever happened to him on God's green earth was that he was abandoned by the two people [who] were supposed to love him the most!" Of the four big existentialist themes – the inevitability of death, the need for meaning, the fear of isolation, and the need for liberty – the two main issues for Will at this stage in his life are isolation and liberty. His conflict comes from the fact that he dreads isolation (a fear of being abandoned again) whilst also craving liberty (taking responsibility and becoming the author of his own life). He knows that taking responsibility and going towards fulfilling his potential would mean having to face the risk of abandonment. So how does he manage to resolve this conflict? What makes it possible for him to gain greater liberty? The key scene is where Sean repeatedly says "It's not your fault" until Will breaks down in tears. This is the moment where Will has a realisation that he can be in the world with other humans as he is, and still be accepted. What's more, he realises that being abandoned is not his fault and that he doesn't need to carry this guilt. His eyes open up to his denial, evasion, and distraction techniques, and he realises that they're unnecessary.

On the other hand, with Sean, the existential givens he has been defending himself against are the other two of the four: death and meaning. Following the loss of his wife he needs to face the inevitability of his own death, and he needs to find meaning. No better place for that than India, he thinks.

© TAMÁS SZABADOS 2016

Tamás Szabados is a linguist, a translator, and an MA student of Clinical Psychology at the UFR d'Études Psychanalytiques of the Université de Paris.



Tallis in Wonderland

"My weight.' What a possessive!"

Paul Valéry

The relationship between your columnist and what he (and everyone else) is inclined to call 'his' body is far from simple, notwithstanding that when you point to the latter you also point to the former. Readers may recall a recent column, 'On Being (Roughly) Here' in *PN* 106, in which I touched on this. I'd like to pick up here some of the trailing threads of its unfinished – indeed unfinished – business.

In particular I want to focus on what I referred to as our being 'embodied subjects'. It is the 'em' in *embodied* that is most mysterious, so let us resume our investigation there. A pebble is a pebble, end of story. To put it another way, a pebble is what it (materially) is. We do not have to qualify this by saying that the pebble is *empebbled*. However, in our case, our relationship with what we materially are is more complex, and at times quite vexed.

Mind-Body Problems

The characterisation of our condition as that of 'embodied subjects' is particularly associated with the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), although he himself found the idea in the writing of his near-contemporary Gabriel Marcel. The attraction of the formula 'embodied subject' is that it seems to sidestep the difficulties associated with other ways of thinking about the relationship between our conscious (especially our thinking) selves and our bodies.

First, the notion of embodiment appears to avoid dualism, and especially Descartes' discredited idea that we are the result of a seemingly contingent union of a ghostly mind and a machine-like body. *Philosophy Now* readers probably do not require an extended tutorial on the problems associated with this dualism. It is enough to note the apparent impossibility of seeing how an immaterial mind, that,

"What A Possessive!" On Being Embodied

Raymond Tallis takes a good look at himself.

according to Descartes, is not extended in space, could be connected with a body that is so extended; even less working out how the former could influence or direct the latter by means of its thoughts, intentions and other supposedly non-material events. Cartesian dualism would seem to make us



impotent ghosts in self-propelling machines.

Varieties of dualism-lite (I shall resist the temptation to call them *dualisms à la Descartes*) don't seem any more satisfactory. For example, the claim that my mind and my material body are not two distinct items but two properties of the same item – so-called 'property dualism' – simply highlights, without solving, the problem that a human is both a body that metabolises dinner and something that also thinks and entertains concepts like 'metabolism' and 'dinner'. This problem is particularly obvious when property dualism is interpreted as *aspect* dualism, according to which my mind and specifically neural activity in my brain are just two *aspects* of the same thing. This conceit overlooks the fact that 'aspects' presuppose points of view (*cf.* the front and back of a house), and hence a consciousness that picks them out. So when John Searle defends aspect dualism by using an analogy with water, saying that neural activity and conscious-

ness stand to one another as molecules of H₂O (which are not shiny and moist) to drops of water (which are), he forgets that we need two points of view, indeed two levels of description – the microscopic and the macroscopic – to give us the two aspects that are connected in any identity relation. In short, Searle's 'solution' to the mind-body problem requires consciousness to explain the relationship between neural activity and consciousness.

The materialist monist alternative – that humans are merely machines made of meat, wired through the brain into the material world – is no more attractive. Its most obvious challenge is to make sense of how bodily events (more precisely, brain events) give rise to or become our consciousness. Consciousness has all sorts of features – awareness, self-awareness, temporal depth, selfhood, the apparent ability to initiate events in the material world – that the machinery of the body does not alone seem capable of housing or generating.

Bodies & Awareness

Such are the woes of dualism and material monism, and they account for the initial attraction of the description of ourselves as embodied subjects. Body and subjectivity are both checked in and are so intimately connected in that phrase that it seems that we don't have to deal with the intractable problems associated with the relationship between them: with the interaction between two Cartesian substances; or with matter that has somehow become conscious. The suspicion, however, arises that we have walked away from the problem rather than solved it. The appeal to the notion of an embodied subject should not therefore be a resting point. After a pause to catch our breath, we need to resume thinking. One way to provoke this is to *look* a little harder: furrowed brows should be associated with widening eyes. Philosophy, after all, is about wakefulness, even surprise, as well as conceptual investigation.

Courtesy of its sensory system, an embodied subject is conscious of the world

that surrounds it, and is in addition aware of its own body. This bodily awareness is extraordinarily complex. Imagine sitting on a train reading a novel. Vibrations in your buttocks, murmurs of the dialogue between the train and the rails, voices in the carriage and phones ringing, and the countryside flashing by and casting its shadows over your torso and the pages of the novel, the taste of coffee in your mouth, are all co-present in your presence to yourself and of the world to you. These experiences are in turn anchored in, and framed by, a body that exercises exquisite judgement in knowing how much to be present to you in its own right, in order to tether your experiences to a solid here-and-now and yet not be so obtrusive as to block your access to the world around you. This bodily self-presence that situates you as a novel reader in space and time has been confected out of quite homely material: abdominal fullness; the triple pressure on your feet from socks, shoes, and the floor; dampness of sweat on your brow and both shoulders, and other items, adding up to the capital of a 'here' that makes everything else be 'there'. Such sensations, however, self-broadcast your body only patchily. There is a 'filling in' of the space between different bodily reports: for example, your head angled over Chapter 6 of your novel is deftly sketched for you in a few brush strokes – such as an intermittent seepage of saliva, a slight soreness in the eyes, a dialogue between a hand and the chin supporting it, and a cooling of your nostrils by inhaled air. In this wise or such, and by means of much automatic joining of the

dots, you are held together as a bodily unity. And all of this has to platform thoughts, emotions, and memories, concerning matters near to hand or at great distance, ranging from the concrete and particular to the abstract and general, others perhaps relating to the story you are reading and your care for its characters. This is the evanescent, endlessly changing, carnal fabric housing the tautology of your first-person being, as you travel from A to B and jealously guard your space on the train.

The Unsubjected Body

Another puzzle comes into view when we look more closely at embodiment and examine how far our subjectivity penetrates our body, and our body figures in our subjectivity. We live, for the most part, in the coastland of our carnal being. Our direct knowledge of the greater part of our bodies is minimal. So long as all is going well, the flame of our awareness of the bulk of our bodily parts burns very low. Our consequent acquaintance with what we think of as the most familiar item in the universe is distant and very patchy. Much of the time I have no idea what my body is up to. I am a spectator (admittedly a concerned one) of its gurgles, twitches, and twinges, uncertain as to their significance. For the most part, my insides are as remote from me as are your insides – silent, transparent. The bulk of my body is like my spleen, having no presence unless diseased – a *terra incognita* requiring scans and the like to reveal it to me as to others. I am mostly oblivious of

the things that are going right, as when my kidneys adjust the composition of my urine to meet the needs of the internal milieu, or when an exquisitely orchestrated gathering of fibroblasts deftly heals a wound. In short, most of my body is innocent of anything that could be called subjectivity. There is nothing corresponding to 'what it is like' to be it. As the great poet and philosopher Paul Valéry observed in *M. Teste*, "We are made of many things that know nothing about us" adding that "And this is how we fail to know ourselves." Conversely we find it difficult to possess many facts about us – "My weight! What a possessive!" – although for some, to do so may be a lifelong obsession, in which the effort of movement, numbers on a machine, and a body



image mediated through literal mirrors, the mirrors of others' consciousnesses, the abstract mirror of actual or imputed social judgement, all merge in a subject seemingly trapped in his or her mode of embodiment, adding up to a quantity of so many kilogrammes that eludes introspection.

The Subject Encapsulated

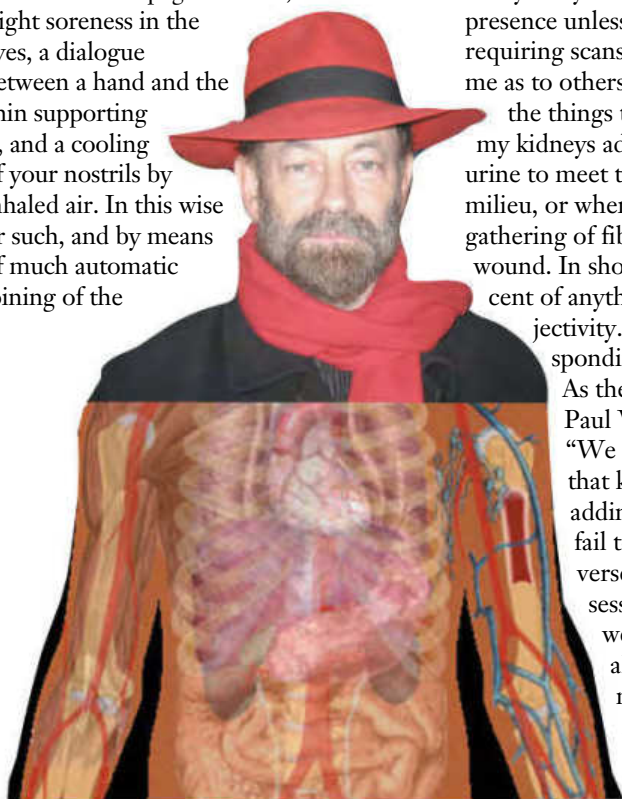
The displacement of mind-body talk by talk of embodied subjects, therefore, gives us only temporary relief from our lack of metaphysical understanding. But there are rewards. The mystery mutates to something richer and more interesting. How is it possible, for example, that your columnist, despite being overwhelmingly opaque to himself, can still through his body live, or seem to live, a life shaped by choices which makes connected sense to him; a life that is *his* life, notwithstanding the impersonal nature of the bodily processes that make them possible? That when he walks into a room, his body seems not only to be the implicit origin of his gaze and the source-point of his voice, but also closer to being what he is – what I am – than a carnal machine serving a thinking ghost?

Describing ourselves as 'embodied subjects' shifts the emphasis from explanation to description. By focussing on the experience of bodily existence, we do not so much advance towards solving the mystery of the relationship between our thoughts and the meat of which we are made, as sneak past it. Having temporarily suspended our appetite for metaphysical self-understanding, we realise when we resume our inquiries that we face a challenge even greater than that presented by traditional (and as we now see, simplifying) arguments over substances such as 'mind' and 'body'. We have made things more difficult for ourselves.

Great.

© PROF. RAYMOND TALLIS 2016

Raymond Tallis's latest book is *The Black Mirror: Fragments of an Obituary for Life* (Atlantic). His website is raymondallis.com.



Philosophy Now

Back Issues

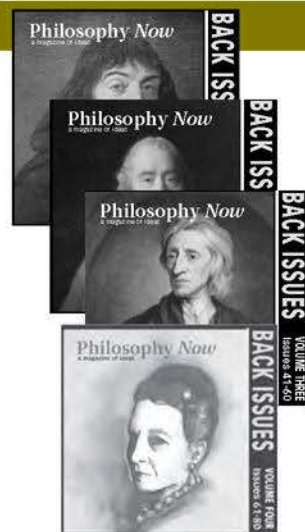
Back Issues on CD

Philosophy Now has been published since 1991, so it is hardly surprising that we're often asked for back issues which have long since sold out. Therefore we've put our first eighty issues onto four CDs in PDF format. The CDs work equally well on Mac and PC, and when opened on your computer screen will look very much like the pages in the original magazines.

Vol. 1: Issues 01-20; Vol. 2: Issues 21-40; Vol. 3: Issues 41-60; Vol. 4: Issues 61-80

Single vol. (1, 2, 3 or 4)	UK£15	US\$23	Can\$35	Aus\$35	NZ\$40	RoW£17
Two volumes:	UK£25	US\$40	Can\$55	Aus\$55	NZ\$65	RoW£30
Three volumes:	UK£35	US\$55	Can\$75	Aus\$75	NZ\$90	RoW£40
Four volumes:	UK£45	US\$69	Can\$95	Aus\$95	NZ\$115	RoW£51

IP-BASED ONLINE ACCESS is available for institutions – please visit philosophynow.org/institutions



Back Issues – Paper

Issue 97 The Self: What is it? How old is it? Is it an illusion? Do Buddhists need it? / Machiavelli / Herder / Marcuse / Non-contradiction
Issue 98 Camus: Life, Ambivalence, Absurdity, Transcendence, etc / Testing Epicurus / Giordano Bruno / What Is Philosophical Counseling?
Issue 99 God's Existence, or Not: William Lane Craig, Simon Blackburn, Van Harvey, Timothy Chappell / Consciousness / Kierkegaard
Issue 100 Philosophy & Language: Chomsky, Davidson, Derrida, Deleuze, Proust / Happiness / Rorty / What is Knowledge, Truth, Causation?
Issue 101 Plato & Democracy: Critiques & Analyses / Kant and Rand / Feelings & Philosophy / Gandhi Opera review / Obit. Colin Wilson
Issue 102 Ethics in Society: Prison; Consumer Responsibility; Drugs in Sport; Judging Islamic Culture / Brief Life: Marx / Existence / Empiricism
Issue 103 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*: Cannons, Cases & Codes / Lenk on Dewey / Midgley on History of Philosophy / Consequentialism is impossible!
Issue 104 The Other Greeks: Pre-Socratics, Democritus, Diogenes, Epicurus / Nietzsche on Love / The Morality Machine / Obscurantism / Fichte
Issue 105 Peace: Innate Violence?; Pacifism not passivism; personal peace; love & happiness / Darwin / Berkeley's 4th Dialogue / Short Hist of Phil
Issue 106 How to Think: Critically Reason, Solve Paradoxes, Not Refute Yourself, etc / Hegel's heirs reviews / Aliens vs Vegetarians / Rorty
Issue 107 Modern French Philosophy: Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Kristeva, Badiou / *Je Suis Liberal* / Noam Chomsky speech / Personal Identity
Issue 108 Art: Encountering it, problems with it, what is it, and where's it going? / Music / Descartes vs Animals / Self-interest in morality

Issue 109 Science & Morality / Einstein's Ethics / Prisoner's Dilemma and Evolution / Defending Badiou / Atheism on Trial / *Chueless*
Issue 110 Liberty & Equality, inc. Redistribution, Surveillance, Paradoxes, Philosopher Citizens / Scepticism / Albert Camus / Common Sense
Issue 111 Humo(u)r: the reasons, ethics & limits of humo(u)r, and beyond / Scrooge's free will / Justice for apes / Wittgenstein vs Occam / Tarski

We also still have copies of these earlier back issues:

Issues 2, 4, 35, 39-47, 55-80, 82, 84, 85, 87-89, 91-96

Back issues cost £3.75 each if you live in the UK (inc p&p) or US\$10/Can\$10/A\$10/NZ\$12/UK£6.50 elsewhere (via airmail). For every three back issues you buy, we'll give you a fourth for free (please tell us which you would like). For full details and tables of contents of all back issues, please visit our website shop at philosophynow.org/shop

PDFs: Our website shop also sells individual back issues as downloadable PDFs.

Binders: Why not give your back issues a secure and happy home? Our smart green *Philosophy Now* binders each hold 12 magazines. Price per binder: UK£8.75, USA \$25, Australia A\$27, Canada Can\$27, New Zealand NZ\$34, or Rest of World UK£15.

Digital Editions (for more info visit philosophynow.org/digital)

Apps for iPad/iPhone, Android and Kindle Fire

Philosophy Now's very own app is available in Apple's Newsstand. The Android version of it is in the Google Play store and there is a Kindle Fire version too. Free sample issue inc.

Kindle

Philosophy Now is available for Amazon's Kindle. You can buy a single issue or an ongoing subscription. (30 day free trial period)

Nook

Philosophy Now's edition for Barnes & Noble's Nook reader also works brilliantly on the Nook app on iPhones. (14 day free trial)

Zinio

There is also an edition for the Zinio app on iPad and Android. Single issue or ongoing subscription.

PN Website Subscriptions

Individual print subscriptions to *Philosophy Now* don't include Kindle, Nook, app etc but do include a password for our website edition plus our archive of 2,000+ articles from past issues. (Your password is available on request or is sent automatically if you subscribe online.) We also sell these web subscriptions separately, from our store at philosophynow.org/shop



Philosophy Now Subscriptions

Philosophy Now is sold from newsstands and bookstores in more than a dozen countries – but if you subscribe you can have each new issue delivered to your own front door and save money too. Better still, individual print subscriptions include password access to our website edition and the complete archive of past issues. Subscribe today at philosophynow.org or fill out and return one of the coupons below.



6 IDEA-PACKED ISSUES FOR £15.50/US\$32!

Questions and inquiries: please email subscriptions@philosophynow.org or phone 01959 534171
To tell us about a change of address, please email addresschange@philosophynow.org

U.K. / Rest of World

Name _____
Address _____

Email (for password) _____

Please circle or underline one of the options below:

- I'd like to subscribe to *Philosophy Now* for 6 issues,

UK	£15.50	Australia	Aus \$40
Canada	Can \$37	Europe	£16.50
New Zealand	NZ \$49	Rest of World	£19.50
 - I'd like to subscribe to *Philosophy Now* for 12 issues,

UK	£28.00	Australia	Aus \$75
Canada	Can \$69	Europe	£31.00
New Zealand	NZ \$93	Rest of World	£35.00
- starting with Issue 112/Issue 113 (delete as appropriate)

• I'd like to buy these *Philosophy Now* Back Issues CDs:
Volume 1/Volume 2/Volume 3/Volume 4. (please circle)

• I'd like to buy the following paper back issues:

• I'd like to buy ___ binders to hold my back issues.

TOTAL AMOUNT PAYABLE: _____

Please make your cheque payable to 'Philosophy Now' or fill in your Mastercard /Visa /Maestro card details below:

Card no. _____
Expiry _____ Security Code _____ Name on card _____

and send it to: *Philosophy Now Subscriptions*
Kelvin House, Grays Road,
Westerham, Kent TN16 2JB,
United Kingdom

United States

Name _____
Address _____

Email (for password) _____

Please select from the options below:

- I'd like to subscribe to *Philosophy Now* for 6 issues, at a cost of \$32.00 starting with #112/#113 (delete as appropriate)
- I'd like to subscribe to *Philosophy Now* for 12 issues, at a cost of \$59.00 starting with #112/#113 (delete as appropriate)

• I'd like to buy these *Philosophy Now* Back Issues CDs:
Volume 1/Volume 2/Volume 3/Volume 4. (please circle)

• I'd like to buy the following paper back issues:

• I'd like to buy ___ binders to hold my back issues.

TOTAL AMOUNT PAYABLE: \$ _____

Please make your check payable to 'Philosophy Documentation Center' or fill in your card details below:

Card no. _____
Expiry _____ Security Code _____ Name on card _____

and send it to: *Philosophy Documentation Center,*
P.O. Box 7147,
Charlottesville, VA 22906-7147
U.S.A.

(You can also order on **800-444-2419** or email pkswope@pdcnet.org)

"... as it was determined to be so."

Kevin Heinrich follows the fate of some determined townsfolk.

The residents of the isolated community of M– were always inclined toward peculiar fads. One year they were obsessed with romance novels and open marriages. Another year, it was crime novels and abstinence. Most of the time these obsessions were harmless and faded from memory rather quickly. On the rare occasions when real harm was done, it was more likely than not that the fad was philosophical in nature.

The town's infatuation with determinism began, perhaps unsurprisingly, in a courtroom. A man on trial for murdering his sister declared that he could not be held responsible for his action, since the murder was merely the latest in an unalterable chain of causes and effects having its origins at the very beginning of the universe. The judge, in complete agreement with the murderer's argument, promptly sentenced the man to death, explaining that his judgement was merely the latest in an unalterable chain of causes and effects having its origin at the very beginning of the universe.

The judge's decision was a matter of controversy. Some argued that surely the truth of determinism undermines our traditional legal judgements and practices. After all, how can we hold a man responsible for events in which he was merely a powerless participant? When someone is struck by a train, we certainly don't hold the passengers responsible. With the proper understanding of causes, we can see that the murderer is in fact no more *responsible* than his victim. Therefore, now that the truth of determinism is known, we cannot in good conscience continue to pass moral judgement and assign punishment.

Nonsense, the critics replied. What are you doing if you let the criminal go free? Are you not *choosing* to do so? Are you not *deciding* to alter your practices based on what you've learned about the world? You purport to do these things for the very *reason* that determinism undermines responsibility, yet you claim that reasons don't have any effect in how things turn out: only physical causes matter. If we change our practices, it would certainly not be in response to anything we have learned about the nature of reality, then. Rather, that would also be an unfolding of necessity.

Not true, countered the reformers. Reasons are still reasons. Just because the inevitable mechanism of nature caused these reasons to appear in our consciousness, this does not alter their binding force. We are compelled to recognize the validity of a good argument, and so our practices must change.

Their opponents responded, Haven't you failed to consistently apply your own reasoning? For if a knowledge of determinism might provide a reason to alter our practices, then surely the guilt of the murderer provides a reason to hang him? In fact, you have presumed an inability to choose on the part of the criminal, but a power of choice on the part of the judge.

While the philosophers bickered, a kind of chaos spread slowly through the town. Someone would steal from his neighbor without a reason. The police would decline to give chase, and similarly offer no explanation beyond a gesture at

immutable physical laws. Worse, the town's insurers would decline recourse for the victim of the theft. Worst of all, victims began to abandon outrage, and even declined to take action to prevent future loss. It was not long before the town ceased to function. Across the town, people either followed the law, or they failed to; businesses either honored contracts, or they did not; people either moved out of the way of moving vehicles, or they did not – there was no apparent order or predictably to peoples' actions. Each event, each decision, was seen as fitting into a mechanical order whose precise operation was opaque to those involved and beyond their capacity to influence. The only commonality was a professed conviction as to the inevitability of the unfolding of events. This state of affairs continued for some time. There were more than a few fatalities.

It should be of little surprise that the solution to this crisis had its origin in the very courtroom where it all began. The difference between the judge's behavior and the rest of the town's, was his affixing of what became known as 'the determinant phrase' to each of his declarations. Whenever making a decision or describing an action, he appended the phrase "as it was determined to be so" at the end of each sentence. He might say, "I sentence you to be hanged from the neck until you are dead, as it was determined to be so," or in the bar, "I will spend the evening at home reading a crime novel, as it was determined to be so." The use of the 'determinant phrase' spread quickly, and orderly life was soon restored. Whether the populace saw philosophical insight in the phrase, or whether they simply grew tired of the freedom from responsibility granted them by determinism, the practice of passive acquiescence to fate was dropped as quickly as it had begun.

Of course, the compulsively philosophical continued their debates even as the rest of the town moved on. Some argued that the determinant phrase was the only rational response to the truth of determinism; others argued it was merely a distraction for the philosophically confused. A few declared that since resuming ordinary behavior was in no way supported simply by the use of a phrase, its effect on the actions of the citizenry was rather an affirmation of the reality of choice – by irrationally choosing to alter their behavior in this way, the residents of the town were providing demonstrative proof of the falsity of determinism, through defiant acts of reasonableness. In any case, the town of M– quickly returned to ordinary life, and the infatuation with determinism was soon forgotten. Use of the determinant phrase continued for a while too, but it was soon abbreviated: the phrase "as it was determined to be so" became "as determined" which then became "as 'twas." Within a generation almost no one could remember what the phrase meant or why it was appended to their statements. A generation later it was dropped from common usage and forgotten completely.

© KEVIN HEINRICH 2016

Kevin Heinrich is a high school math teacher who once studied philosophy. He lives in Colorado, USA.

Philosophy Now Very App-ealing!

There is now a *Philosophy Now* app for Apple, Android and Kindle Fire devices. Our app works on tablets and smartphones. You can download the app for free (it includes one free sample issue) then buy a subscription within the app to read the magazine. App subscriptions include a 1-month free trial period. All of our back issues are available for purchase within the app too. Purchased issues can be downloaded to your device for reading without an internet connection.

Please visit the Apple App Store, Google Play, or Amazon Appstore for details.

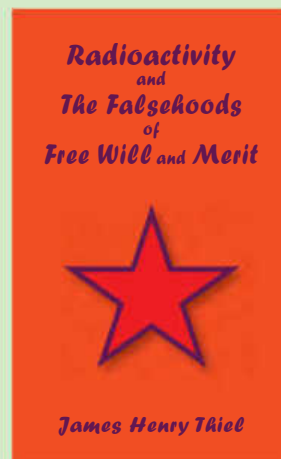


(Please note: when you purchase an app subscription you are buying it from Amazon, Google or Apple, and it does not include a *Philosophy Now* print or website subscription. Similarly, our print and website subscriptions do not include an app subscription. For print/website subscriptions please see p.47 or visit philosophynow.org)

The nonexistence of free will is no mere academic issue.

In conjunction with the fundamental nonexistence of merit it is a world-changing reality.

- (1) Multiple rationales demonstrate free will as a falsehood. Free will cannot reasonably be said to exist regardless of whether the desires motivating voluntary actions are causal or noncausal in origin.
- (2) What goes by the name of merit is a deceptive linguistic fabrication representing nothing more in substance than voluntary actions one desires to bring to bear upon others. Merit is possessed of no independent existence and no person on a fundamental basis deserves or merits anything at all.
- (3) Free will and merit enjoy no relationship of ethical or moral relevance because neither exists. The common illusion of such a relationship derives from miscomprehension of situations of manipulation. These in reality have nothing to do with free will and they have nothing to do with merit.
- (4) The nonexistence of free will and merit in no way impedes society from instituting whatever measures it needs. Accomplishment of desired ends merely requires voluntary action regardless of the nonfreedom of the will. The reality indeed never has been otherwise.
- (5) The language of merit transforms the subjective "I desire to impose measure X upon person Y to accomplish goal Z" into the pseudo-objective "Person Y deserves measure X" making one believe measures must be brought to bear because they are "deserved" while concealing motives. Masquerading as an independent and absolute entity merit thus takes on a pseudo-objective life of its own. Wielded as a rhetorical weapon by narrow interests – enjoying passive support from unwitting free



- will compatibilists – it represents an agency of unparalleled deceit and manipulation. The question is not what anyone deserves or has earned. The only pertinent question is what measures as guided by the past one wants to take in order to achieve desired ends.
- (6) The prescriptions of merit are conferred for past actions. This is an absurdity. The past is gone. The impossibility of doing anything "for" the past exposes merit as a fabrication.
- (7) Society's interest is to eliminate merit terminology from the vocabulary replacing it with specification of motivations and desired goals. Nothing of epistemological substance can be said or done using the language of merit that cannot be accomplished in terms of what one wants to do and why one wants to do it.
- (8) Measures taken in response to the actions of others in the context of understanding free will and merit as falsehoods will differ significantly from those prevailing under the current circumstances of deception.
- (9) Economic interest never resides in the retrospective payment for that misleadingly considered earned or merited. Economic interest resides uniquely in proactive measures for achieving desired goals. The salary of an executive for example should reflect only the amount requisite for subsequent incentive and collaboration. It is seen as a matter of earnings or merit only by the deluded.
- (10) A society comprehending the nonexistence of free will and merit will tend toward socioeconomic equality because none will accept these as pretexts for disparity.

Michelson and Morley in 1911 failed to demonstrate the ether medium through which electromagnetic energy was hypothesized to propagate. This opened the door to Einstein's Theory of Relativity and changed concepts of physical principles profoundly. An understanding of the fundamental nonexistence of any dimension or capacity of free will and merit changes the ethical landscape to no less revolutionary a degree. It signals the demise of secular and nonsecular merit-based institutions. *Radioactivity and The Falsehoods of Free Will and Merit* by James Henry Thiel explores these issues extensively. It presents multiple rationales demonstrating that free will and merit do not exist and that there exists between them no relationship of ethical or moral relevance. It is available at amazon.com.

How long does it take a document to change the world? This one changes everything.

Become an IB Examiner

Philosophy Examiner positions now available

The emphasis of the IB philosophy course is very much on "doing" philosophy. It invites the development of perspectives that encompass cultural pluralism and an awareness of the international context within which it unfolds.

IB Examiners benefit from:

- an international educational experience
- insight into the assessment process
- unique personal development opportunity
- highly competitive payment rates

IB teaching experience is not essential
For more information and to apply,
please visit our website:

www.ibo.org/examiners



International Baccalaureate®
Baccalauréat International
Bachillerato Internacional